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A Grounded Theory of Political Intelligentizing in Business Administration

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Abstract

This study focuses on the substantive area of business administration using the classic grounded theory method. Business administration is mostly driven by political games between top-level corporate managers. The main concern of the managers I met was that they wanted to be more politically successful. For them, success meant being able to change regularly the course of decisions and action within their firm. The study led to the emergence of a core variable called political intelligentizing. Political intelligentizing explains the recurrent main concern that these managers have to resolve, and it explains the competences managers have to combine to succeed regularly in organisational politics. They resolve their main problem through political intelligentizing which consists in acquiring, developing and combining six specific skills: time matching, rhetorical fitting, silence juggling, strategic forward-thinking, strategic interacting and relationing.

Keywords: organizational politics; political games; political behavior.

Introduction

I have taught leadership and management in Executive Education for 10 years. My "students" are mostly 40 year-old managers who hope to improve their business management skills. They come with many concerns linked to their own management problems. However, most of them have a recurrent concern, which was clearly expressed by a businesswoman in the Class of 2012: "I am no good at managing political situations. How can I get better?" Since I could not answer this concern directly, it became the starting point for a new research project. For the study, the main concern was framed as follows: "Is there such a thing as a consistently successful political behaviour pattern?"

The political dimension of business administration has been highlighted for decades (Long, 1962). A firm can be considered as a political system (Morgan, 1998) in which actors strategically defend their own goals (Crozier & Friedberg, 1977). Beyond this statement, the question was to know whether some managers are regularly successful in political games and, if so, whether a specific behavioural pattern can be

discovered among them. The goal of this research was to produce relevant, useful theory to help new managers to resolve their main concern.

Data Collection and Analysis

When beginning research using classic grounded theory, it is crucial to avoid preconceptions (Glaser, 2014). This research posture was facilitated by the fact that my knowledge of the literature on this subject was close to zero. Thus, I fortunately did not have any preconceived concepts in mind when starting the fieldwork.

I collected a first set of data through three face-to-face interviews. These three interviews were carried out on the same day and I started analysing the data right away. The interviewees were managers randomly selected among my list of one thousand former Executive MBA students. At the beginning of my research, I asked one grand tour question: "Do you have the impression that some people manage better than others to navigate their way through political games?" The discussion with interviewees regarding this question led them to describe their own political behaviour, which they considered more or less successful, and the behaviour of the people they judged to be better than they were. I used several follow-up questions that came to me as the interview progressed, to ensure I understood what they were saying and to discuss in more detail points that seemed crucial or problematic to them.

I began to write memos after the first interview. My comparison of the memos written after each interview, revealed a wide range of ideas, actions, and behaviours related to organizational politics. I was not able to make connections between the memos. I decided, therefore, to carry out additional interviews using the same grand tour question. I analysed each interview and constantly compared my memos with the previous ones. This second data collection continued until possible codes began to appear. Twelve additional interviews were necessary to reach this point, as the content of the interviews varied enormously and showed a huge range of aspects of political behaviour.

I first used the "six C's" (Glaser, 1978, p. 74) to organize the data. The "six C's" is a code that distinguishes data into general categories: causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariance and conditions (Glaser, 1978). Within each category, I started to generate codes emerging from the data. For each code, I sorted memos that helped me not to forget ideas emerging from the coding process itself.

Several core categories and related categories emerged from this process. I focused on one core category named political intelligentizing and worked on its related categories. For the core category, I reached theoretical saturation by conducting a new wave of eleven interviews with managers from a wide range of companies.

Core Related Categories

Political intelligentizing emerged as a core variable insofar as it is capable of explaining “the main concern and its recurrent solution of those being studied” (Christiansen, 2011, p. 200). The main concern of participants is that they want to manage political games more successfully within their company.

It is important to note that success in political games is defined by the participants as successfully changing decision-making and the course of managerial action in line with their individual or collective interests. These interests are not always personal. Some participants also attempt to influence decisions to protect their team or defend the interest of their clients. Success is therefore defined in terms of the ability to influence the course of events. It does not always go hand-in-hand with the overall success of the company. The participants’ main concern is to influence the course of events; they do not necessarily consider the consequences of this influence, either positive or negative, on the success of the company.

Political intelligentizing can be explained as acquiring, developing, and combining skills in order to influence the course of events in a company. The concept of political intelligentizing has six related categories that can be grouped into two series of interrelated sub-core variables. The first series is made up of three dimensions: time matching (knowing how to act at the right moment), rhetorical fitting (choosing the correct rhetorical technique) and silence juggling (using silence effectively). These sub-categories are linked together. For example, the skill of time matching will encourage managers to choose between rhetorical fitting or silence juggling. Similarly, it is impossible to excel at political games without rhetorical fitting, but this skill is difficult without the mastery of silence juggling.

The second series of sub-core variables is made up of the following three dimensions: strategic forward thinking (collecting data, analysing data, building prospective scenarios, and capitalizing), strategic interacting (a series of skills aimed at inciting others to reveal themselves, while remaining opaque oneself) and relationing (creating, maintaining and exploiting relations with a large number of people). These three last dimensions enable the manager to combine the three previous dimensions effectively.

All of the six dimensions are interrelated; managers improve time matching skills using strategic forward thinking and relationing. Similarly, strategic interacting and rhetoric fitting enable them to manage relationing better and consequently to improve their strategic forward thinking. Finally, to develop strategic interacting, managers need to master the principle of silence juggling. Acquiring, developing and combining these six dimensions are fundamental to resolve the main concern of the participants.

Time matching

The first category related to political intelligentizing is time matching. The best political players know the right moment to act. They have a sense of rhythm. They can act fast or be endlessly patient depending on the circumstances. Their strength lies in their ability to align the time of their action with other actors’ agenda and mood. Concretely,

good players plan their successive actions strategically during a political game. They also give themselves the latitude to alter the order of their actions, to act earlier than planned or postpone a task depending on the current situation and their opponent's state of mind.

For example, one of the participants planned to ask one of his colleagues to support his project at a board meeting. He got to the office and realised that this colleague was in a bad mood. Even if it was vital for him to obtain an immediate reply, he resisted his own sense of urgency and instead acted in an empathetic manner towards his colleague. He knew that it would be more prudent to wait for another meeting to make his request. He used their time together to develop his relationship with his colleague and changed the order of his action. Temporal mastery is a key issue in political games.

Rhetorical fitting

A good political player knows how to handle the art of rhetoric. The interviewees particularly admired this skill during my research. Rhetorical fitting has several sub-categories such as persuading (the art of influencing by using affect) and convincing (the art of influencing by appeal to your opponent's rationality). It also includes knowing how to choose your audience, constructing an appropriate message according to this audience, and aligning gestures with your message. The idea of rhetorical fitting is that managers develop all their verbal and non-verbal expression according to their audience. To do so, they must know sufficiently well the people with whom they interact. Rhetorical fitting is thus closely linked with relationing. Furthermore, the choice of the discourse content depends very much on the conclusions of strategic forward thinking.

Silence juggling

If the best political players master the art of rhetoric, this study shows that they also master the art of silence. Silence juggling is defined as using silence effectively. I discovered several strategic uses of silence during the fieldwork. The first use is silence to build trust. Remaining silent about confidential or potentially threatening information generates confidence between two managers. The ability to remain silent about key issues fosters trust and future alliances between actors.

The second use is silence for active listening. Political players remain strategically silent to collect more data through listening and observation. Their silence gives a space in which others can express themselves. This silent posture is magnified by specific gestures and attitudes to convince others that they really matter.

The third use is silence for self-preserving. Linked to carefulness, the use of silence is critical for not giving power to other players. The best political players remain silent about their true opinions about people and actions linked to their organization. They know that networks transcend the formal boundaries of firms. Consequently, they must be careful in any social interaction inside or outside their organization. The silent posture is the best way not to make serious mistakes.

The fourth use is silence to let the imagination run wild. The best political players do not speak too much. However, they let others imagine things about them. This is perhaps the most strategic use of silence. Myths, legends and rumours seem to be more powerful than reality. Political players use it to their advantage. They never say much about their real power, networks, knowledge, or competences, but they let others make assumptions. In many cases, other people's imagination gives them more credit and prestige than real facts.

The fifth use is silence to make a deep impression. Silence is the best friend of words. Best political players use silence in their discourse in order to give more value to what they say. They dramatize their discourse. Concision, rhythm, and silence mastery are their key principles when they express their opinion.

Strategic forward-thinking

Strategic forward-thinking refers to the cognitive dimension of political intelligentizing. This category designates a cognitive process in four steps: collecting data, analysing data, building prospective scenarios, and capitalizing. To build relevant prospective scenarios, it is necessary to collect data constantly about people, processes, and activities within the organization.

The best political players do not really select the kind of information they collect ex-ante. They absorb a spectacular amount of data, even if it does not seem relevant or useful initially. They know that any information can be useful depending on the context. Therefore, they build a personal global data bank. For example, knowing the name of the CEO's golf club is not strategic information in itself, but it can become important if a manager needs to meet the CEO alone, during a political game. Mapping the power holders is not enough. Managers need to map the emotional links between individuals, individual concerns, and ambitions, as well as formal and informal information systems.

When a new political situation emerges, the best political players start to scan the data they have collected and select what is most relevant in order to deal with the specific political situation. Through analysis, they also seek to determine whether the information is credible. After selecting the most relevant and credible information, they integrate it into a holistic, multilevel vision of the situation. Then, they can start prospection.

Building prospective scenarios is a two-step process. First, it consists in anticipating the behaviour of each actor in relation to a potential change in the political situation. Managers think in terms of individual behaviour trajectory: "If this happens, he/she will react like this . . ." They imagine several scenarios and anticipate their consequences in the political game. Second, they select one of these scenarios, that best serve their own interests, and they build an action plan to make it happen. This prospective work is not an exercise in divination, it is a way to think about the best future possible and to try and make it happen.

The last component of strategic forward thinking is capitalizing. Each political experience must be memorized in order to improve the accuracy of the next prospection. At the highest level, decision makers do not change very fast. Therefore, the capitalization phase is a way to learn more about all these people all the time. This active learning process will be hugely valuable in managing the next political situation.

Strategic interacting

Strategic interacting consists in behaving in such a way as to inspire trust, incite others to reveal themselves, while remaining opaque oneself. Strategic interacting is made up of five basic behaviours observable among the best political players: self-assuring, stepping softly, positing, persevering, and tempering.

Self-assuring means giving others the impression that the manager thoroughly masters the situation and/or subject. Such an impression has the effect of inciting others to trust them and go along with their decisions. To do this, the best political players appear serene and strong, sure of their ideas and positions. This behaviour can be linked to genuine self-confidence. However, such behaviour is not always the case as self-confidence can be feigned. Whereas self-confidence is an intrinsic personal attribute, self-assuring is a way of behaving in front of others in order to take ascendancy over them.

Stepping softly is a recurrent behaviour of the best political players. They act carefully, assessing each discourse and each action before performing it. Political players know that information is critical (Crozier & Friedberg, 1977). They trust no one and avoid revealing too much information about their private life, opinions, interests, and actions. The less people know about them, the less risk they represent in political games. A perfect smoke screen surrounds the best players. They take every possible precaution in their social interactions.

Like reassuring, positing is not necessarily linked to personality. Political players appear optimistic and cheerful even if inside they feel differently. They know that this positive attitude creates positive social interaction. Indeed, political players need information. To collect it, they need to create a positive atmosphere that encourages others to divulge secrets and critical information. Smiling and being optimistic are the best ways to obtain confidences. People like to talk with positive people, whereas they avoid pessimistic, embittered people.

Persevering is a blend of tenacity and endurance. Political players accept temporary losses and never take no for an answer. They have long-term vision and a high capacity to work hard over long periods. When someone opposes their ideas, they simply try to find another way to reach their goal. They never give up.

Tempering is related to emotional control. It means that political players adapt the expression of their emotions to the situation. Sometimes they have to control themselves and not react immediately to a situation. Sometimes, they need to react more vigorously than they really want to, in order to respond to the expectations of others.

This ability to express emotions that fit the situation is not easy to develop. It is a critical asset for political players.

Relating

Relating is creating, maintaining, and exploiting relations with a large number of people within and outside the company, with the aim of collecting information and obtaining their support. Networking is part of relating. But it is more. The best political players give the impression, real or imagined, that everyone has a special relationship with them. To do so they use empathy, which can be genuine or strategic. Some political players are neither altruistic nor humanist, but they will develop warm relationships with others in order to exploit them at a suitable moment.

The best political players are interested in everyone in the company, from the managing director down to the most powerless assistant or trainee. They know that all of them are sources of information and can also give information to other people at the appropriate time. They use their interpersonal skills to place themselves at everyone's level and maintain the relationship. Relating will facilitate their political action considerably, because it opens up opportunities that others do not have. They use unexpected networks that they have patiently developed strategically over time, throughout and beyond the organization.

Conclusion

Classic grounded theory study involves a conceptual comparison stage during which the theory and concepts generated are compared conceptually with the literature (Christiansen, 2001; Christiansen, 2006; Glaser & Christiansen, 2007).

Firstly, my literature review shows that the concept of political intelligentizing is close to certain concepts such as political intelligence (Adams & Zanzi, 2006), political behaviour (Farrell & Petersen, 1982) or political skills (Ferris and al., 2000). However, the definitions of these concepts are conjectural. They lack the consistency and precision required to respond to the main concern of managers. These definitions are also often confusing, since they include skills, types of actions, and the strategic choices of political players. The use of grounded theory to build the concept of political intelligentizing gives it more clarity and makes it possible to differentiate between political skills and political strategy.

Secondly, previous studies have showed that political players identify power holders (Pfeffer, 1992) and their power bases (French & Raven, 1968). They also collect information on the positioning of these power holders toward the political problem (Kotter, 1985). Although my research confirms the need for this information, it also shows that it is not sufficient. Strategic forward thinking includes these elements but it takes the process further by showing that managers must also anticipate the evolution of their power and power bases by developing future scenarios.

Thirdly, the category relating and the sub-category tempering can be compared with the concept of Emotional intelligence developed by Daniel Goleman (1998). This concept has five components: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills (Goleman, 1998). Tempering is close to self-regulation insofar as it involves controlling one's emotions and adapting one's reactions to individuals and situations. However, the notion of tempering does not only involve constraining one's emotions. It can also involve increasing the level of a reaction, as in the case of simulated anger. This aspect is not present in the concept of self-regulation, but is an essential component of tempering.

Relating needs empathy and social skills since it involves creating and maintaining links with other people. These are properties of Relating. Moreover, it is interesting to note that relating is close to other concepts that have emerged from previous classic grounded theory (CGT) research: conditional befriending in the work of Christiansen (2006), cultivating relationships (Simmons and Milkman 1993; cited by Christiansen, 2006), and pseudo-friending (Guthrie, 2000; cited by Christiansen, 2006). The next stage of this research could thus be an analysis of the correlations between these concepts to develop an integrated formal theory of relating.

Overall, the concept of political intelligentizing uses several patterns that can be found in the concept of opportunizing developed by Christiansen (2006). Opportunizing is made up of five dimensions: conditional befriending, prospecting, weighing up, moment capturing, and configuration matching.

The pattern of moment capturing can be considered as a sub-category of time matching. Moment capturing is defined as "the spasmodic seizure of strategic business opportunities where quick intervention is critical for optimal outcome" (Christiansen, 2006, p.117). Clearly, moment capturing is a sub-category of time matching, since it describes one of the ways in which managers can act. Similarly, the category prospecting echoes one of the sub-dimensions of strategic forward thinking. The manager must first gather information to develop effective scenarios.

The category conditional befriending included two elements: confidence building and modifying people's behaviour. The main concern of the participants in my study is quite similar to the idea of modifying people's behaviour. Indeed, managers attempt to gain advantage by influencing the course of events and decisions in the company. To gain advantage, they sometimes have to modify other people's behaviour. The concept of influencing is particularly crucial for both opportunizing and political intelligentizing.

This in-progress research has several limitations. The first is that it deals solely with political skills and not with political strategies. It gives no indications of the types of strategies that managers can implement during a political game. It would be interesting to continue this research to discover whether this corresponds to a real need felt by the participants and whether, accordingly, it would be valuable to explore this aspect of organizational politics.

Nor does this study deal with ethics. For example, the notion of trust between individuals recurs as a fundamental element in a large number of categories. My interviews showed that the best political players can either create genuine relationships of trust with other actors or develop false relationships of trust to exploit others. My participants were preoccupied with this point. They want to become better political players but do not want to use dishonest techniques to achieve their objective. It would be interesting to extend the study to techniques used by the best political players and their impacts to investigate whether it would be possible to respond to this concern.

Finally, during the Grounded Theory Seminar in April 2014, Barney Glaser and Judith Holton pointed out the richness of this study. They made me realize that each sub-category has the potential to become a core category. According to them, silence juggling for example, could be a good candidate for formal theory. The art of mastering silence may not be related to a single substantive area. Thus, further work on this concept might lead to the formulation of a more general theory. It would also be interesting to continue to explore the links between the generated categories and other categories stemming from classic grounded theory.

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