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## **UNIT 16 POWER AND POLITICS**

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### **16.0 OBJECTIVES**

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After studying this unit, you should be able to :

- explain the concept of power;
- discuss the importance of power;
- identify the sources of power;
- describe the process of obtaining power;
- discuss the concept of organisational politics;
- analyse various types of political behaviour;
- explain the factors influencing the political behaviour; and
- describe the basis of organisational politics.

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### **16.1 INTRODUCTION**

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Structure is required for every organisation. Structure creates positions in the organisations. Position gives power and authority to individuals. It is the power through which individuals control the activities of the organisation. Therefore, individuals try to gain position in order to exercise power in the organisation. For example, there are several senior executives under one Chief Executive Officer (CEO). It is the position of CEO which gives positional power to the person by which he/she controls all subordinates, varied activities and the entire organisation. Therefore, every senior executive below the CEO aspire to be the CEO. Same is also the case with politicians in political parties to become the PM/CM or occupy leadership position in the party. Power is also necessary for the efficient functioning of the organisation. According to strategic constituency theory, power is needed in the organisation to cope with and solve the most critical problems of

organisation which arises because of environmental uncertainties. The power structure of any organisation is revealed through organisational chart. However, power can be acquired formally and informally as well. When the top management of the organisations understand the source of power, it becomes easy for them to manage power and politics in favour of the organisation while minimising their negative effects. The success of a manager depends upon how efficiently and accurately he/she is able to analyse the organisation's power structure and politics accurately. In this unit, you will learn the concept and importance of power, the sources of power and the process of obtaining the power. You will further learn the concept of organisational politics, types of political behaviour and the factors influencing the organisational politics. You will be further exposed to the basis of organisational politics.

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## **16.2 CONCEPT OF POWER**

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Power exists in all social situations and practically pervades in all organisations. Different authorities have tried to define power in different ways. According to R. A. Dahl, power is the ability of one person or group to cause another person or group to do something they otherwise might not have done. It is the ability to influence others successfully in the desired fashion. Power resides in individuals (such as managers, and informal leaders), in formal groups (such as department and committees) and in informal groups. It is the principal means of directing and controlling organisational goals and activities. The person or the group having power influences the behaviour of others. We can say a manager or the supervisor has the power when works are done by their subordinates as they wish to be done, way they want to be done etc. Thus, the manager's ability to get the work done depends upon the power possessed by him or her. In fact, almost everyone, at every level from within and outside try to exert their power on organisation to get their work done. Accordingly, knowledge of power in organisation is very important for every individual in general and the people possessing power in particular in order to manage their activities and for the smooth functioning of the organisation.

You should not get confused with the power and authority. Though power and authority are used interchangeably, but there exists difference between the two. While power is the ability to influence others, authority is the right to command. Normally power is exercised by the person but authority is attached with the position and it is legitimate. Authority is one of the major sources of power. Authority is always positional, concerned with position and legitimate. However, when one's authority can increase one's growth in organisational hierarchy, but the growth may not accompany same amount of power. Moreover while authority normally moves downward but power moves in all direction, depending upon the power being used by the person in the organisation. It is because power is not institutional but the authority is institutional.

There are ways in which power can be used to help the organisation. It is called positive when the managers of the organisation debate over the appropriate course of action to improve the quality of organisational decision making. In positive sense, individuals try to establish a balance in their personal and organisational interest and openly solve the problem of the organisation without any hidden agenda.

In the organisational context, the terms power has also negative connotations. It becomes negative; when individuals associated with them normally use organisational resources for their personal advantage. They try to achieve their personal goals at the expense of the other goals. Decisions are made against the interest of organisation and there is extreme pursuit of self-interest and individuals pursue their hidden agendas. In negative sense, there is illegitimate use of authority, resources and information of the organisation.

The bases and sources of power are interchangeably used. However, it is the base or platform from where the power is generated. Base refers to what a person controls, which ultimately enables him/her to influence the behaviour of the group. While the strongest power base is legitimacy and greater power, the weakest is the coercion.

Organisation is a place of dependence. The structure of the organisation further enhances the dependency. One cannot do every thing all-alone. Everyone is dependent on others for getting the work done in the organisation. When someone possess something that others require but you alone control that something, you make them dependent on you. As a result, the possessor of the resources enjoys power over them.

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## 16.3 IMPORTANCE OF POWER IN AN ORGANISATION

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For a variety of reasons, power is very important and needed in the organisation. Not only the organisation needs power for its functioning, but people in the organisation seek power because of the following reasons:

- Power is used in the organisation to control the people and other resources so that they cooperate and help to achieve an organisation's current goals.
- Power can also be used to engage in politics and influence decision-making process in order to help promote new and more appropriate organisational goals.
- It is the power, which influence complexity, formality and centralisation of activities in the organisations.
- Individuals having power even determine about the size of the organisation, allocation of rewards, selection of technology etc.
- Power is needed for the efficient functioning of the organisation.

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## 16.4 SOURCES OF POWER

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The leading authorities on power French and Raven have divided an individual's power into two sources. They are formal and informal. Let us learn them in detail.

### 16.4.1 Formal Power

The formal power comes from the position being occupied by the person in the organisation. It is derived from the organisation structure and positions being occupied by individuals in the organisation structure. Higher the position in the organisation structure more is the power being enjoyed by the person occupying that position. Infact, when an individual accepts some formal position in the organisation to performing the day-to-day duties and responsibility, the organisation gives formal power and authority to the person to accomplish the job related to tasks and duties. Normally persons possessing positional power are more powerful than the persons having informal power in the organisation. There are four types of formal power found in organisations. They are legitimate, reward, coercive and information power.

**Legitimate Power :** It may be defined as the power to control and use the organisational resources to achieve organisational goals. The legitimate power provides the legal authority to the person over the organisational resources. In true sense, legitimate power is the most powerful and ultimate source of an individual's power in the organisation. It is also broader than the power to coerce and reward. Specifically, it includes acceptance of positional authority by members of an organisation. Through this power, a manager not only controls the organisational resources but also can control the behaviour of their subordinates.

**Reward Power :** Reward power is just the opposite of coercive power. The reward can be tangible or intangible or both. It is the power to give promotion, praise, raise, projects and other kinds of rewards to one's subordinate. It also includes friendly colleagues, important information, and preferred work shifts etc. One who distributes rewards and that others view it as valuable will have power over them. This power is relevant, till the subordinates value the rewards. However, persons having reward power may find it difficult to motivate subordinates when he /she needs tangible rewards. Interestingly, the degree to which an

individual seeks such rewards, it influences the ability of managers to give or withhold them and accordingly enjoy the power over that individual.

**Coercive Power :** Coercive power is dependent on fear. It is the power to give punishment or withhold it. Out of fear of the negative results that might occur if one failed to comply, people respond with this power. Through the use of coercive power, one can demote, terminate and suspend others. It involves frustrating others through restriction of movement or controlling by force the basic physiological or safety needs, withholding praise and goodwill. Infact , coercive power is possibly most often used, most often condemned, and most difficult to control. An individual may exercise coercive power because of his physical strength, high tones, filthy languages, or the ability to grant or withhold emotional support from others.

**Information Power :** Individuals having the access and control over the information exercises this power. Because of their position or access and control over the information, whatever they wish to be performed by the others in the organisation, they get it done. The greater the access and control over the information, greater is the information power. For example, a manager who is in the possession of more information can control the subordinate better because he can solve his/her problems better. As a result, the subordinate develops more dependency. However, this is not in the spirit of an effective and empowered organisation where information sharing is essential and very important.

#### **16.4.2 Informal Power**

Informal power is not formally given by the organisation . The existence of this power is not revealed anywhere in the organisation structure. Thus people possessing informal power do not have positional power. But they are as powerful as the person occupying the positions in the organisation. It is possible because of their knowledge, skills, personality etc. Accordingly, informal power can be broadly categorized into three types such as expert power, referent power, charismatic power. Let us learn them.

**Expert Power :** Expert power is informal power and does exist in every organisation. Expert power is influenced and wielded as a result of expertise, special skill, or knowledge possessed by the individuals. Expertise has become one of the most powerful sources of influence. The significance of expert power has increased manifold because the world has become more technologically oriented. As a result, in every organisation, in every branch of knowledge, individuals possessing unique knowledge and skills are able to wield power as a result of their expertise.

**Referent Power :** By giving some one's reference or getting identified with some person with position and power, some individual in the organisation get the things done as they wish. Thus, referent power is based on identification with a person who has desirable position, power, resources or personal traits. When some one admires and identifies with a political leader or an influential person in the locality or the state, he /she can exercise power over others. This type of power develops out of admiration of some powerful person. The referent power has a lot of similarity with charismatic power.

**Charismatic Power :** It is a deep-rooted form of referent power. Charismatic power is based on the emotions and feelings of the followers. It is based on the assumptions and belief that the leader has some special or exceptional personality, ability and other characteristics, which influence and inspire the followers to believe and follow that person. This power is normally found in religion, politics and unionism. It has been also found that where the charismatic power exists, the importance of legitimate, coercive and reward power diminishes. This power vanishes when the leader vanishes from the scene. The charismatic power cannot be delegated because the other fellow may not possess the same qualities and attributes as found in a charismatic leader. The negative side of the charismatic power is that the followers blindly follow him/her without understanding their responsibilities.

## Check Your Progress A

- 1) Why is power important for the organisation.

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- 2) Distinguish between formal and informal sources of power.

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- 3) Distinguish between legitimate power and coercive power

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- 4) Distinguish between expert power and charismatic power.

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## 16.5 PROCESS OF OBTAINING POWER

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To obtain power, individuals and different groups in the organisations use variety of power tactics. Following are some of the popular tactics, which are being used by individuals to gain power in the organisation.

**Friendliness :** In order to be powerful in the organisation, even some individuals take the help of flattery, creation of goodwill, acting humble, and being friendly with many people with position and power to create a power base for them. They may make request to those powerful people to give him/her the favour. By identifying with them these individuals become powerful in the organisation.

**Making oneself Irreplaceable :** To gain power, individuals have to develop their specialised knowledge, skill and relationship so deep and broader that it will be difficult for the organisation to find a substitute for their replacement. It can also be done by deliberately accepting responsibilities which automatically brings them into the contact of many managers, who ultimately may favour them for promotion, reward etc.

**Networking with Powerful People :** It is not important that how many people do you know in the organisation, but whom you know. To gain power some individuals try to identify with powerful individuals in terms of their influence in the organisation, higher level of authority, status symbol, position, control over resources, expertise etc. By identifying and establishing themselves with those persons one tries to become powerful in the organisation.

**Building Coalition :** In order to get there work done individuals form alliance and coalition with each other over the issue based matter. But in this case, as interests of individual's changes from time to time, therefore, coalition has to be actively managed by their members. In case of coalition, each group tries to get the greater share of the power. Normally, more coalitions are created in the organisation where there is a great deal of task and resource interdependence. However, when there is less interdependence among subunits, naturally there is less coalition formation among the subunits. Especially, when they are largely self-sufficient or there exist plenty of resources.

**Being Assertive and Establishing Credibility :** One should know what one is supposed to know. To be powerful, one has to assert oneself by using direct and forceful approach such as demanding compliance with requests, repeating reminders, citing rules that require compliance. Moreover one has to establish one's credibility in terms of sincerity, honesty, and punctuality in words and deals.

**Building Pressure :** This is a hostile method of gaining power. Normally trade unions in organisation use this power. They might threaten a strike or show down if the management does not accept their demands. The use of threats may provoke counter-threats rather than concession. However, pressure tactics are a part of power struggle in organisations. Some individuals become member or leader of unions / associations to build pressure on organisation to gain power.

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## **16.6 CONCEPT OF ORGANISATIONAL POLITICS**

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Pettiberg (1973) defined organisational politics as activities in which managers engage to increase their power and to pursue goals that favour their individual and group interests. According to Pfeffer(1981) organisational politics involve those activities taken within organisations to acquire, develop and use power and other resources to obtain one's preferred outcomes in a situation in which there is uncertainty or dissensus about choices. Employees working in the organisation can engage in political behaviour to gain promotion or influence organisational decision-making in their favour. In fact, politics is the unauthorized use of power which increases or protect ones own personal interest. Accordingly, Mayes and Allen (1977) are of the opinion that organisation politics is the management of influence to obtain ends not sanctioned by the organisation or to obtain ends through non sanctioned means. In fact ,organisational politics is power in action.

Power and politics are very closely related with each other. Organisational politics is associated with resource allocation, conflict resolution, and decision making process in organisation. Politics is fact of life for almost every organisation. When employees in organisations convert their power into action, we describe them as being engaged in politics. Normally it is seen that individuals who have good political skills have the ability to use their bases of power effectively in the organisation. Individuals play politics to gain more power in organisation, to have command over resources, to have their more voice in decision-making and to fulfill their individual goals.

Organisational politics has two sides. Positive side of organisational politics is characterised by the balanced pursuit of individual and organisational goal, open problem solving and analyzing the situation in win-win terms. Negative side of organisational politics is characterised by viewing the situation in win-loose situation, having hidden agenda, pursue self interest etc. That is why some authorities have rightly said that “ politics as a subset of power is of illegitimate in nature . Though political behaviour is outside one's specified job requirements but individuals play politics to use one's power bases and to be the part of the distribution of advantages and disadvantages within the organisation.

As politics is a fact of life in organisations , everyone has to play variety of politics but people who ignore this fact of life do so at their own peril. The political behaviour in organisations include many activities such as spreading rumours, leaking confidential information, exchanging favours with others in the organisation for mutual benefit, lobbying on behalf of or against a particular individual or decision etc. However, politics is a self-serving behaviour not sanctioned by organisations. When people play politics it causes disharmony, conflict, stress, anxiety and uncertainty in the organisations.

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## **16.7 TYPES OF POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR**

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The political behaviour of the individuals in the organisations can be broadly divided into two categories such as: legitimate, illegitimate.

**Legitimate Political Behaviour :** It is called legitimate politics when there is too much compliance to the rules and the regulations of the organisation by the individuals. Legitimate politics include complaining to one's supervisor, bypassing the chain of command, forming coalitions, obstructing organisational policies developing contacts outside the organisation through one's professional activities.

**Illegitimate Political Behaviour :** It will be called illegitimate politics, when individuals who pursue some extreme activities such as any type of sabotage, whistle-blowing, and symbolic protests, like wearing unorthodox dress or groups of employees calling in sick.

Steven and Mary Ann Von have suggested seven categories of political activity in the organisation which are discussed below :

**Attacking or Blaming Others :** In an organisation, members make effort to attack rival or unwanted persons or groups. They may blame them for their own failure. This is done for projecting bad image of unwanted or rival persons.

**Selectively Distributing Information :** As you must be aware that the information is considered as the most important tool of power. Members who possess relevant and strategic information become powerful in the organisation. This information is shared among own favourable persons. This is done to increase the power base and gain the support of the favourable persons in the organisation.

**Controlling Information Channels :** Individuals who have the power, may control the informal behaviour of the persons. They may encourage their desired behaviour and discourage undesired behaviour. In order to please the powerful persons, people try to exhibit the desired behaviour in the organisation.

**Forming Coalitions :** People form coalition to influence the behaviour of other persons or group. In coalition, two or more persons join hands to achieve some common objectives. This is done to gain the favourable support or influence the decisions in the organisation.

**Cultivating Networks :** People develop networks based on variety of social relationship in the organisation. The formation of network may help in getting information and gaining support. This may also facilitate the members initiatives and favourable decisions by the persons who are the part of the network system.

**Creating Obligations :** In an organisation, if you oblige somebody, he/she may also support you. The powerful persons try to create an obligations chain in the organisation so that they could get the support from all the obliged persons.

**Managing Impressions :** It refers to creating favourable images in the organisation. In this process, the powerful persons exhibit their behaviour in such a manner that others develop a favourable image about them. They may project themselves as the protectors of members interest or may be visible at the time of crisis to attract others attention and create favourable image for themselves.

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## **16.8 FACTORS INFLUENCING ORGANISATIONAL POLITICS**

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There are various factors, which influence the political behaviour of individuals in organisation. They can be broadly categorised into; Individual factors, and organisational factors.

**Individual Factors :** Some individuals play politics to satisfy their individual needs, like to gain power for control and to influence decision-making process of the organisation. They aim at increasing the area of their

influence. Nobody wants to lose power in the power struggle because power can be used for fulfilling his/her desire. Moreover, some individuals play politics because of their high need for power. They are basically internals and self monitored people. Individuals also play politics because of their expectation for quick success in life at any cost.

**Organisational Factors** : Following are some of the organisational factors, which influence the individuals to play politics in the organisations.

- Resources are limited in the organisation. Every department and every individual in the organisation wants to have optimum resources. As a result, individuals are engaged in politics to get the maximum advantages of the distribution of resources.
- Limited resources like position, power, promotion etc. are open to interpretation. As a result, any one who is in need of those resources feel that in the process of distribution of the resources he/she will be deprived of those resources. Therefore they take the help of politics in the organisation.
- When there is uncertainty and ambiguity in decision making because of unclear rules and policy, some individuals play politics to get the advantage of the situation.
- When performance evaluation and its outcomes are subjective, qualitative and unclear, individuals play politics to get the outcome in their favour.
- Some times people play politics because of high performance pressure. It is just to put pressure on the authority to withdraw control and lower the performance target.
- Democratic and participative decision-making culture of the organisation is also prone to politics, because everyone wants to enhance his/ her importance and give opinion.
- When people at higher level in the organisation play politics, it is natural that at the lower level too politics will be there.

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## **16.9 THE BASIS OF ORGANISATIONAL POLITICS**

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To improve political effectiveness in the organisation, different paths are available to individuals. Some of the common bases through which one can improve one's political behaviour are:

- Supporting one's boss where and when the boss needs it. You have to behave in the manner that the boss is always right. As a result, one gets identified as an individual belonging to a boss's group.
- Some people do not express their resistance despite of their reservation over some issues. They wait for the crisis in the organisation to express their reservation to get the favour and influence.
- Some individuals develop powerful allies with influential people to play politics in the organisation.
- One has to appear indispensable through knowledge, skill, arguments and deeds to gain political advantage.
- To play politics one can gain control over the scarce organisational resources.
- One has to be visible in terms of one's extraordinary performance to play politics in the organisation.

### **Check Your Progress B**

1) Enumerate the process of obtaining power.

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2) Distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate political behaviour.



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3) What do you mean by managing impressions ?

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4) Enumerate the factors influencing the organisational politics.

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## 16.10 LET US SUM UP

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Organisation is a coalition of interest, so exists in the identification and solution of the problem. In the process of negotiation for consensus, politicking takes place. Therefore, the existence of power and politics is the inevitable phenomena in every organisation. In order to manage and to be managed in the organisation efficiently every individual starting from the top to bottom needs to have knowledge of power and politics in the organisation.

Power structure of an organisation is revealed from organisation chart. It shows only the formal sources of power being possessed by the individuals, group and the departments in the organisation. It also reveals how are decisions made in the organisation. As it is the power, which enables the power holders to control the activities of the organisation and do whatever they wish to do, therefore every body wants to have power in the organisation. To gain power there are broadly two sources. They are formal and informal sources. While formal sources of power are legitimate but people do use informal sources of power to get advantages of the organisation in their favour. As positions are limited in the organisation, so is the positional power. But people play politics to acquire position.

Organisational politics is self-serving behaviour, which is not sanctioned by the organisation. Nevertheless people play politics to be part of the distribution of advantages and disadvantages within the organisation. Political behaviour in organisation can be legitimate or illegitimate. There are various individual and Organisational factors, which influence individuals to play politics in organisation. And to play politics, individuals use different mechanism. However, politics in organisation causes disharmony, anxiety, stress, and conflict and put challenges to formal authority. Therefore, it should be managed to minimize its negative impact on the organisation.

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## 16.11 KEY WORDS

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**Charismatic Power** : Power derived from exceptional personality and abilities of the person which influence and inspire the followers.

**Coercive Power** : The power to give punishment or withhold it.

**Expert Power** : The Power to use, distribute or withhold the information.

**Information Power** : The power to use, distribute or withhold the information.

**Legitimate Power** : The formal power to control and use the organisational resources to achieve organisational goals.

**Politics :** Activities in which managers engage to increase their power and to pursue goals that favour their individual and group interests.

**Power :** The ability of a person or group to influence other person or group.

**Referent Power :** Power as a result admiration and identification with powerful persons.

**Reward Power :** The power to give promotion, praise, raise, projects and other kinds of rewards.

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## 16.12 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

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- 1) What is Power? Why do people need power?
- 2) Do you think the positional power is the most powerful power in the organisation? Why so? Explain different types of formal power in the organisation.
- 3) What is informal power? Explain different types of informal power in the organisation.
- 4) Explain the tactics people adopt to gain power in organisations.
- 5) What is politics? Why people play politics in the organisation?
- 6) Write notes on :
  - a) Importance of power in the organisation.
  - b) Charismatic power.
  - c) Legitimate and Illegitimate political behaviour.
  - d) Factors influencing politics in the organisation.

**Note :** These questions will help you to understand the unit better. Try to write answers for them. Do not submit your answers to the university for assessment. These are for your practice only.

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## SOME USEFUL BOOKS

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