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*By Lisanne van Bunderen*



# The whys and whens of intra-team power struggles

By *Lisanne van Bunderen*

**Recruiting the right talents to join a company and team is one of the main remits of any self-respecting manager. However, getting those talents to work effectively and harmoniously together is an entirely different challenge. It is therefore of paramount importance that team leaders adapt their power structure accordingly in order to keep office politics to a minimum and prioritize productive work to the benefit of the company and those who comprise it.**



Canvass the opinion of entrepreneurs as to why they chose to opt for the relative insecurity of “going solo” and there is a good chance many will say how happy they were to say goodbye to office politics. Ask team managers within companies what the biggest day-to-day working headaches are that they have to confront and there is just as good a chance that power struggles and office politics will also figure high on their list of problems.

No team or company wants or needs its members bickering about pay, office space, information, or status (to name just a few of the most regular gripes on the list) when they should be getting on with the job in hand. Research into the issue has so far identified the types of conflictual issues that tend to arise. However, even more important for the team manager trying to nip such problems in the bud is knowing why and when things come to the boil and to remould their team accordingly.

## Defining the problem

Academic research into the phenomenon of power struggles within the workplace define them as “competitions over relative control of valuable resources”. This covers a broad spectrum of tangible and less tangible bones of contention, including salary, budget, personnel, knowledge, reputation, and decision-making. Varying though these may be in nature, the underlying motives are the same – members of the team or “rival” teams are ultimately jockeying for position, either with a view to raising their own status in the eyes of their superiors in the quest for personal gain or lowering the profile of their competitors with the same objective in mind.

However, what these two strategies (termed in research circles as “other-deprecation” and “self-promotion” respectively) also have in common is a negative impact on the team and/or company in question: the chances of intra-team conflict resolution are impaired and, with it, the actual profes-

sional responsibilities that are supposed to be assumed, carried out and achieved.

## Fight the power?

Power and its resultant effect on team morale and cohesion are key to the equation. One of the most famous (and erroneous) examples in the recent business past has to be the removal of Steve Jobs from the Macintosh group in order to shift him towards the same corporation’s new product development set-up. Resource allocation had been a sticking point between Jobs and others for some time and so he was conveniently shunted aside in order to dampen down his desire to push forward the Mac. Once he got wind of the internal power struggle against him, he retaliated and was duly fired. The rest is history. And yes, Apple went on to bigger and better things, but what if the struggle had been avoided in the first place?

It is here that hierarchy becomes a defining factor. Traditionally it has



been viewed as a unifying and structuring force that can bring co-workers together. However, this depends very much upon the mind-set and set-up that senior management have implemented in the first place. The individualistic working ethic that can often result from the misuse of hierarchy within a team or company will produce very different results to that of a more collectively minded organisation when faced with internal or external threats, as a recent study has sought to illustrate.

### Conditions for conflict

Via two studies, including a laboratory study of 85 three-person teams and two field studies of 158 and 149 organisational work teams, crucial insight has been provided into the why and when of power struggles. Points of inquiry within the studies included ascertaining to what extent the internal team structure, such as the distribution of power and the degree of outcome interdependence instigate disruptive

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intra-team power struggles. In short, were those actively engaging in office politics egged on by their internal working environment? Threat was also an important part of the equation, as the studies explored how situations of intergroup conflict and uncertainty can cause internal power struggles.

### The right dynamic

The key findings from the research conducted illustrate the importance of the internal-external dynamic. A

direct correlation was discovered between the internal set-up, power and dependence structure within a team and how it responds to threats from the outside. The option remains open to all team members to counter such threats in a collectivist or individualistic manner, the latter presenting a far higher risk of instigating power struggles. The likelihood of intra-team power struggles occurring was found to be instigated, even encouraged by the kind of working culture instilled within

# The whys and whens of intra-team power struggles *(continued)*

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a given team. The more individualistic the spirit within a company or team, the higher the chances that members will engage in office politics when facing an external threat.

It is therefore of tantamount importance to create a flatter hierarchical structure that will create and facilitate a more “all in it together” attitude to work, the team, fellow team members and the company as whole. Whilst ultimately someone has to be pulling the strings in their role as team leader, due care and attention should be paid

rate culture and environment is not only a structural issue but also a human one – getting all team members not just feeling involved but actually being involved in discussions is crucial.

Naturally, their hierarchical superior is the one who will have to take a final decision on projects that involve all, but by giving everyone a voice in the process, bickering about status, resources, reputation or any other of the myriad types of intra-team struggles is more likely to be dampened down. In an agile and harmonious team, every

that requires attention, in order to see to what extent the duration of an intra-team struggle affects the outcome.

It would also be worthwhile analysing such struggles in relation to the instigator to better understand how the identity or role of the workers responsible for such tensions impact the magnitude and consequences of the conflict in question. However, what rings loud and true is the importance and relative ease of implementing or adjusting team structure in order to then proceed in creating the kind of positive vibes within that will support and nurture a collectivist working culture, for the benefit of the team and the company as a whole.

No one chooses their colleagues but they can make professional life a whole lot easier by learning to work with them. ■

*“Creating a healthy corporate culture and environment is not only a structural issue but also a human one...”*

to those working under the team leader in order to ensure that infighting is kept to a minimum. Another option is to create a high level of inter-reliance among fellow team members by producing the right kind of rewards and outcomes, as this is a sure-fire way of boosting team morale and strengthening links between colleagues.

## A listening ear

Another practical implication to emerge from the study is the need for leaders of more dysfunctional teams where office politics is rife to adjust their structure accordingly and, above all, adopt a more open and democratic approach to team leadership and teamwork. Creating a healthy corpo-

rate culture and environment is not only a structural issue but also a human one – getting all team members not just feeling involved but actually being involved in discussions is crucial. Naturally, their hierarchical superior is the one who will have to take a final decision on projects that involve all, but by giving everyone a voice in the process, bickering about status, resources, reputation or any other of the myriad types of intra-team struggles is more likely to be dampened down. In an agile and harmonious team, every

## Extending the debate

Analysis of the all-too-familiar problem of office politics does not stop here. Future research should consider other factors in the equation, including power struggles in the face of scarce resources, crises and even physical threats. Time is also a factor

**This article draws its inspiration from the PhD thesis *Tug-of-War: Why and when teams get embroiled in power struggles*, written by Lisanne van Bunderen and published as part of the ERIM PhD Series Research in Management. It can be freely downloaded at [WEB https://repub.eur.nl/pub/105346](https://repub.eur.nl/pub/105346)**

**Watch Lisanne talk about the findings of her research at [WEB www.rsm.nl/powerstruggles](http://www.rsm.nl/powerstruggles)**

*Lisanne van Bunderen is Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior, Amsterdam Business School, University of Amsterdam, and is a researcher at S-ray Diagnostics. [EMAIL l.vanbunderen@uva.nl](mailto:l.vanbunderen@uva.nl)*

