

Leading with Power

By Randall L. Englund

Introduction

Organizations by their very nature are political so effective project managers identify their sources of power and become politically sensitive. This paper covers the elements of a political plan and shares an approach, examples, and insights that turn potential victim scenarios into win-win political victories. Key elements are to apply the components of a revitalization model and speaking truth to power process. A metaphor describing three of the animals in a political jungle helps to identify and characterize traits that need to be addressed or accommodated if a leader wishes to exercise influence and achieve project results. The main objective is to share creative approaches to prosperity in project based organizations which includes negotiating the political landscape of organizational project management.

Peak performing people use potent processes, positive politics, and pragmatic power to achieve sufficient profit and keep organizations on a path towards a purpose. To achieve these goals, successful project and portfolio leaders develop a Political Plan, as well as effective project plans. A Political Plan addresses the power structure in an organization, identifying critical stakeholder levels of impact and support, building a guiding coalition, and determining areas of focus for maximum impact. Creating an environment for project success means leading with power and becoming proficient in speaking truth to power. By applying these concepts to difficult situations, project leaders become better equipped to implement change, develop skills that achieve greater impact, and advance project management maturity in their organizations.

Taming the Project Based Organization

One of the challenges of moving to a project based organization is the time and processes necessary to change behavior within the culture or the culture itself. A revitalization model helps to understand the stages that naturally exist. It describes a society moving through a series of temporary overlapping but distinct stages of change until the majority of its members are ready for change. Few believe in the benefits of change until they actually experience them.

The revitalization model depicted in Exhibit 1 carries a full description in Chapter One of Graham and Englund's *Creating an Environment for Successful Projects, Second Edition* (2004). Inevitably an organization's steady state (1.) gets interrupted by some change, such as competitive action, a customer request, or a market disruption. This creates stress within individuals (2.), some of whom see the need for making a change to adopt project management or achieve higher maturity in the processes employed. Some who voice the need for change wind up exiting the organization, either voluntarily or not. Since this is usually not a desired movement, many choose to remain loyal, not speak up or rock the boat. So things get worse until the resulting cultural distortion (3.) is so bad that drastic change is required. This gets the organization moving toward revitalization (4.). Then the pattern repeats. Steps 2. and 3. are painful and often protracted over time. Most problems and mistakes surface during this time.

One answer (albeit not a preferred one) for people questioning how to deal with a difficult situation or manager is to wait until things get so bad or the person retires. This cultural distortion stage is so onerous that change happens. The model is consistent with chaos theory, which says there is disorder before order. While the stress and distortion are uncomfortable to experience, patterns exist and boundaries limit the chaos. With shared purpose and meaning, together with skilled and motivated people, an organization unleashes creativity and energy that forms new order and life.

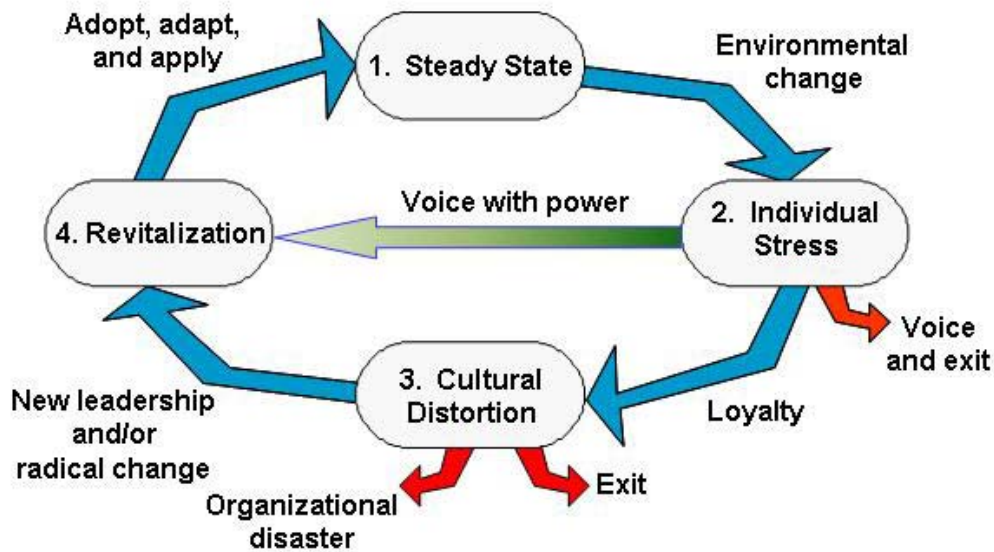


Exhibit 1. Stages of a Revitalization Process

Shared purpose and meaning can be implemented when management sees its role as defining, selecting, and executing projects according to an agreed upon strategy. Budgets are often set up as win-lose situations where if one department wins, the other loses. This situation leads to suboptimization, where what is best for each individual ruins the collective. To address these issues, a first step is for management to act as a team and work together to develop a process aimed at encouraging new types of behavior. It is unreasonable to expect project team members to embrace the changes if management does not model the desired behavior.

A project leader who wants to minimize the disruptions seeks to follow the path through the middle of the exhibit and implement voice with power. The following steps describe how to do this.

The Political Jungle

One element of a political plan that can help turn potential victim scenarios into win-win political victories is to assess and negotiate the political landscape. An organic approach to project management means to observe the world we live in and utilize or apply natural systems to organizational challenges. Especially when implementing any change in organizations, resistance arises. A metaphor of the political jungle describes this resistance as someone new entering the jungle. Resident animals react to this invasion in different ways, most often by attacking the invader. These reactions can be noted and then used to guide the interloper. Desired behavior is to apply different actions that ensure survival and enable the creation of something new. Three jungle species and their traits can be readily identified.

Solitary tigers live and hunt in forests alone. The tiger is the largest member of the cat family. Tigers require large areas with forest cover, water, and suitable large prey. A typical predatory sequence includes a slow, silent stalk, followed by a lightening fast rush to close the gap, killing its prey with a bite to the neck or throat. A tiger must kill about once per week but is successful only once in ten to twenty hunts. An adult tiger defends a large area. The primary resource of this territory is food. Male territories are always larger than those of females. A female tiger knows the other females whose territories abut hers. Females know their overlapping males and know when a new male takes over. All tigers can identify passing strangers. Solitary tigers actually have a rich social life; they just prefer to

socialize from a distance. The risk of mortality is high even for territorial adult tigers, especially for males, which must defend their territories from other males.

An astute project leader identifies the tigers in his or her organization. The size of the territory over which they rule indicates they are C-level—chief executive, operating, information, or project officer. They may be general managers or possibly in the human resource department. They are strong and skillful empire builders. They are solitary because of the unique nature of their position; they wield the most power but are often isolated. This happens because other people fear repercussions from telling them the whole truth or all the information. A “tiger’s” environment is often very political and tenuous because many other people aspire to take over this territory and reap its benefits.

In contrast, lions are the most social of cats; both males and females form cooperative groups. Females live in “prides” of related individuals, and males form “coalitions” that enter prides from elsewhere. Both sexes show extensive cooperation in territorial defense, hunting, and cub rearing. Prides compete with each other in territorial disputes. Males leave prides when they become mature or when a new coalition moves in. Male lions wander far and wide in search of food and companions until they are old enough and join a large enough coalition to take over a pride and become “resident.” Number of offspring depends on ability to gain and maintain access to a pride. Most coalitions are evicted by a larger rival coalition and are rarely able to become resident in a pride again. Competition for residence in a pride can be very intense, with larger groups dominating smaller ones in aggressive encounters. A male coalition rarely holds onto a pride longer than two to three years before being run off by fierce challengers. The best predictor of success is the size of his coalition.

Both male and female lions roar. Resident males only roar when on their own territory—roaring by males is a display of ownership. Lion grouping was traditionally explained by the advantages of cooperative hunting. Groups of two or more females are far better at defending their cubs. Females minimize risk by moving away from the roars of strange males and avoiding new males. By banding together, females are better able to defend their cubs from direct encounters with infanticidal males, and by roaring together they minimize the chance that these encounters will occur at all.

Lions discovered there are cheaper ways to keep intruders out than fighting every one—roaring can be heard for miles, proclaims the caller as a territory owner, and informs the listener of the callers’ sex and location. However, spoken intentions are notoriously unreliable—it is easy to lie with words and tones of voices or vocal “signals.” Vocal signals are too easily falsified, and there is nothing to guarantee their honesty. “Assessment” signals tell something about an individual that cannot be faked. Thus to really convince a rival to stay away, use an assessment signal—show up to demonstrate how capable the legitimate owner really is. A conventional signal such as roaring can be made honest by conveying information that cannot be faked and by calling the bluff of liars. Lions do both.

Since size counts, members of a coalition often roar in group choruses that make it obvious they are roaring together and not in competition with each other. A group chorus cannot be imitated by an individual or a smaller group or produced accidentally by roaring competitors. A resident male keeps his declaration of ownership and intent to defend the pride honest by consistently challenging any intruder that disregards his roar. Resident lions roar and nomadic males make their way silently around them. The world’s most social felines, lions usually get by with a little help from their pride mates.

The lions in organizations are often functional managers and in marketing and sales. These people are outgoing, approachable, want things their way, and are driven by clarity and a single-minded purpose. They protect their boundaries and develop multiple relationships; they are visible, strong, and skilled. Their “roars” are heard across the organization.

Brown bears are solitary animals except for females with cubs. They are territorial with males having larger territories overlapping the smaller territories of several females. Brown bears can be seen in close

proximity in areas of extremely abundant food sources. Although one of the most feared animals in the world, brown bears go out of their way to avoid people. Brown bears will flee as soon as they detect humans. Brown bear populations cannot easily bounce back from losses because they breed slowly. Although it usually lopes along, a brown bear can charge surprisingly fast if threatened (up to 30 mph, uphill, downhill, or on level ground, for short stretches). The bear strikes a cord of fear and caution, curiosity and fascination: wily, smart, strong, agile, and independent.

Bears have very good memories. They have excellent navigation and long-term memory. Bears are among the shrewdest and most intelligent of mammals. Bears are usually silent. However, they make a variety of grunts in amiable situations, loud blowing noises when frightened, and clack teeth when frightened. They can express a range of emotions from pleasure to fear. Bears leave territorial signposts—scent marking and long claw marks in tree bark. Although they possess a fierce and aggressive reputation, bears are more often peaceful and solitary creatures. They prefer to roam in areas undisturbed by humans.

The advice when encountering a bear is: do not panic, run, or yell. Instead, act calm...stand your ground...look at the bear...and talk softly to it. Most bears will leave of their own accord after determining that you are not a threat. Bears read body language, so it is important to maintain as much composure as possible.

Bear people in organizations have a deep introspective capacity, are caring, compassionate, seekers of deeper self-knowledge, dreamers at times, and helpers. They have tremendous power and physical strength, intelligence, inner confidence, reserve, and detachment. When in conflict, they retreat into the cave, draw great strength from solitude, choose peace instead of conflict, and contemplate the healing power. Their contribution is strength, introspection, and self-knowledge. Bears can sometimes be too quick to anger and too sure of their own power. While they have little to fear, they can forget caution. Being unaware of their limits in certain settings can be disastrous. Examples of bears are people at remote sites and technical professionals, often identified as engineers or “geeks.”

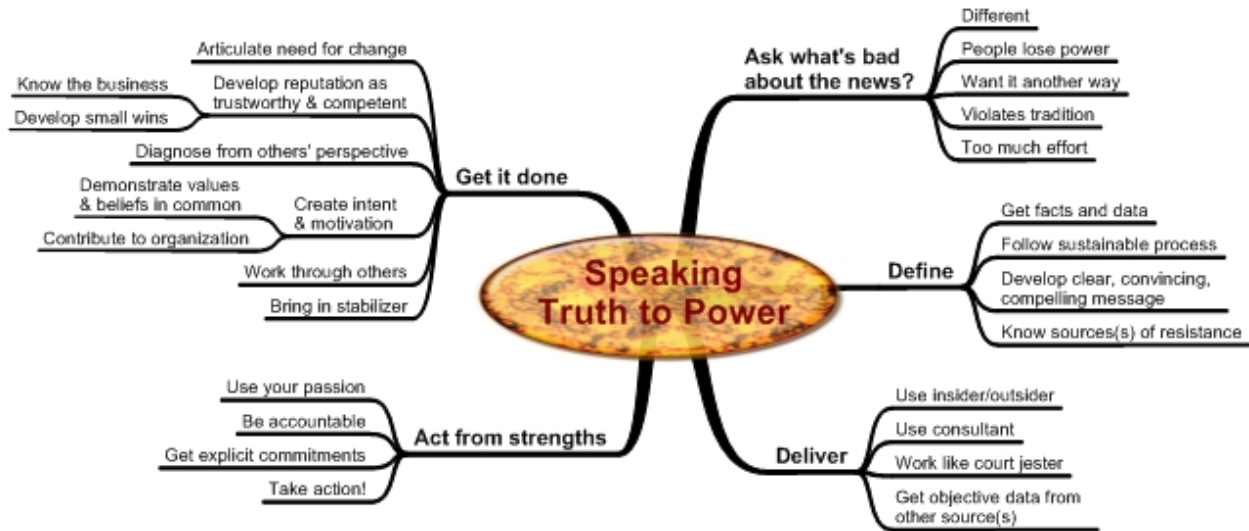
Leading with power in a political jungle starts with identifying, naming, and characterizing the “animals” that occupy the territory. This important step helps predict resistance to changes in the status quo.

Speaking Truth to Power

Project leaders are closest to the action in most organizations which makes them most knowledgeable about what is going on and what should be done to achieve project success. Unfortunately, they often do not possess the resources or approval to do those things. And the people in power are not always open to hearing the truth. This happens for any number of reasons, such as pressure from shareholders, a drive to meet an out-of-alignment measurement system, or insufficient knowledge about the project management process. Even worse, the messenger may get proverbially “shot” for delivering the “truth” (bad news) to those in “power.”

Surviving the political jungle requires specific skills from a project leader. Completing the previous step of identifying the players equips him or her to next apply a speaking truth to power process. Exhibit 2 summarizes a more detailed description found in Chapter Three of Englund, Graham, Dinsmore's *Creating the Project Office: A Manager's Guide to Leading Organizational Change* (2003). The essence of this process is to prepare yourself with a detailed understanding of the current situation, reality, and history of the people and organization that addresses why people believe and behave the way they do. Then define all the facts and data about the truth of the situation. Mere opinions are not sufficient. Delivering the truth may require help from other sources as well as keeping discussion founded on evidence, much as depicted in current American television on crime scene investigations (*CSI*). Draw courage from acting on your convictions, passion, and commitment to do the right thing. Getting the job done means you clearly describe the pain of the current reality plus share a vision for a future state that is different. Your

credibility and transparent motivation make people want to listen to what you say. A key point is to speak in the language of the persons needing to receive the message, such as in upper management speak or in engineer speak. For example, too many technical details do not interest upper managers who want to know how the project will create revenue, increase market share, or solve particular problems. An effective sender matches the style and content of the language used with the preferred means of communicating used by the receiver of the message.



Political Plan

Since organizations by their nature are political, effective project leaders become *politically sensitive*. That means to be aware of how things get done in an organization but not get dragged into negative political battles. Beware of ambivalence towards power and politics. Take a stance where motivation is to create a win-win situation that is out in the open. The alternative is to become a political victim of a win-lose situation that is conducted not in the open but in a back room or out of sight of full disclosure. History is replete with scenarios where growth is limited or curtailed by dictators, mob controls, or special interests. Free markets or open organizations accomplish far more in shorter time periods.

Create a political plan that addresses the power structure in your organization, levels of stakeholder impact and support, who forms a supporting or guiding coalition to make the vision become reality, and what are the areas of focus that constitute a strategic plan.

Understand the power structure and decision-making processes in your organization. Do this by analyzing how things get done:

- Sources of power
 - Position
 - Information
 - Contacts
 - Network
 - Situation
 - Personal
- Credibility
 - Network
 - Relationships
 - Knowledge
- Where, who, and how decisions are made

- Critical stakeholders:
 - Sponsor, dependent, participant
 - “Who could stop this effort?”
- Develop a different approach to each stakeholder based upon diagnoses from previous steps:
 - Leverage your strengths
 - Build support
- Build a guiding coalition
 - Develop dedicated grass roots effort
 - Enlist support of powerful sponsors
- Focus efforts on areas:
 - Central or visible to other corporate members
 - Important for organizational goals
 - Tied into resource allocation
- Demonstrate legitimacy and expertise by:
 - Developing proficiency
 - Employing best practices
 - Communicating successes
- Use your cultural context to decide if the political plan should be developed by yourself or with a team, and if it can be shared in public or kept private. A closed, highly political organization means proceed with caution. An open, enlightened organization allows for inputs, findings, and recommendations to be accessible by and useful for all stakeholders.
- Document the findings in a plan (see templates on the web) that includes:
 - Assessment of environment
 - Description of political jungle
 - Stakeholder roles
 - Potential issues
 - Approach to stakeholders and issues
 - Strategic response, such as positioning and steps to take
 - Action plans
- Act on the plan

Summary

Leading with power is a learned skill. It involves assessment, identification, skill-building, planning, and application. Like all learning it involves movement between reflection and action.

A revitalization model describes typical stages that happen within all organizations. Understanding its natural flow invokes understanding and possibly patience about dealing with current realities. It depicts alternatives in whether to voice, exit, or be loyal to the organization. It also points to a step that can accelerate revitalization, and that is to voice with power and speak truth to power. Speaking truth has its risks. However, there are discrete practices and skills that can be applied not only to survive the process but to prosper and achieve greater impact.

The political process is always at work in organizations. The political jungle is a chaotic environment. Success comes to those who identify the “animals” in the jungle and recognize that they exhibit certain traits and patterns. Each is driven by a purpose. Being effective with these “animals” involves working in their preferred operating modes, speaking their language, and aligning common purposes.

An overlay to the project management process is to prepare a political plan. This plan involves observing how an organization gets work done and performing stakeholder analysis. It further incorporates creative human dynamics to encourage proactive thinking about how to respond to and influence other

people in the organization. Since power is the capacity to translate intention into reality and sustain it and organizational politics is the exercise or use of power, leading with power means embracing the political environment as a means to achieve success.

References

Englund, R., Graham, R. & Dinsmore, P. (2003) *Creating the Project Office: a Manager's Guide to Leading Organizational Change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Graham, R. & Englund, R. (2004) *Creating an Environment for Successful Projects, Second Edition*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Lions, tigers, & bears. See web site <http://nationalzoo.si.edu/Publications/ZooGoer/>.

Political Plan slides and templates. <http://www.englundpmc.com> and www.madelinelearning.com.

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