

# The IS Machiavelli

KEITH OVERTON

MORGAN KEEGAN AND COMPANY, INC.

MARK N. FROLICK

THE UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS

## ABSTRACT

It is an accepted norm that influential individuals in organizations seek to perpetuate and increase their sphere of control by any means necessary. These established organizational powers are typically masters of the informal means of influence, organizational politics. At the same time, however, IS professionals who are the subjects or targets of these influence attempts are often technically oriented professionals who have more limited political skills. These technical professionals typically embrace a rational model of organizations which places power and influence in the hands of the logical, who argue their cases objectively on the basis of reason. Understandably, rationally oriented persons are frustrated by the political model of organizations which relies upon subjective perception, social networking, impression management, and bargaining to solve the problems of resource allocation. This frustration contributes greatly to the early burnout of IS professionals and their alienation from the organization. In addition, the lack of IS political clout constrains the effectiveness and efficiency of IS personnel in performing their appointed tasks within the organization. Political naiveté sidetracks promising careers, leads to employee disillusionment and premature burnout, and perpetuates the political impotence of the IS function. Perhaps worst of all, this political gap perpetuates the organization's old methods of doing business and hampers the business process reengineering and cycle-time reduction efforts which constitute the most valuable contribution that the IS function has to offer an organization.

Political skills are, to some degree, innate and instinctive. However, they can also be acquired and refined through practice. It is important for IS professionals to make themselves into more complete and well-rounded individuals by honing their political skills along with technical expertise, thereby ensuring their future effectiveness as IS professionals as well as personal and organizational benefit over the long term.

Information systems professionals can enhance their development of these necessary political skills by following these seven guidelines: take a political inventory, know the organization, analyze the situation, align IS goals with corporate objectives, utilize coalitions liberally, negotiate effectively, and promote the value and efforts of IS. By following these seven guidelines, IS professionals can develop and master the political skills necessary to increase their effectiveness within their organizations and become "IS Machiavellis" in their own right.

## INTRODUCTION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICS

"A prince, therefore, who possesses a strong city and does not make himself hated, cannot be assaulted; and if he were to be so, the assailant would be forced to retire shamefully. ...

"A wise prince should follow similar methods and never remain idle in peaceful times, but industriously make good

use of them, so that when fortune changes, she may find him prepared to resist her blows, and to prevail in adversity."

**Niccolò Machiavelli**

(1469–1527)

from *The Prince*

The work environment of information systems professionals is unique — it is dynamic, often unstructured, and marked by a high degree of uncertainty. At the same time,

the work performed by IS professionals can truly be described as revolutionary in that it has the potential to dictate or permanently alter the flow of an organization's most important resource — information. The immense organizational power inherent in such a position is seldom overlooked by influential organization members who, having gained a position of power through both formal and informal means, seek to perpetuate and increase their sphere of control by any means necessary. These established organizational powers are typically masters of the informal means of influence, organizational politics. At the same time, however, the IS professionals who are the subjects or targets of these influence attempts are often technically oriented professionals who have more limited political skills. These technical professionals typically embrace a rational model of organizations which places power and influence in the hands of the logical, who argue their cases objectively on the basis of reason. Frequently, however, accomplishing one's objectives in an organization "has nothing to do with front-end analysis, planning, implementation, or follow-up. Instead, success is determined by internal and external politics" (Steininger, 1989). Understandably, rationally oriented persons are often frustrated by the political model of organizations which relies upon subjective perception, social networking, impression management, and bargaining to solve the problems of resource allocation. Indeed, over half the respondents to a recent *Computerworld* survey of IS professionals indicated that office politics is their greatest job-related frustration (Ludlum, 1990). This frustration contributes greatly to the early burn-out of IS personnel and their alienation from the organization (Schmidt, 1991).

The results of this political domination of the information systems function by savvy organizational politicians are both widespread and detrimental to the organization. This lack of IS political clout constrains the effectiveness of IS personnel in performing their appointed tasks and reduces the ability of the IS function to deliver objective analysis, design, and implementation proposals. Political naiveté sidetracks promising careers, leads to employee disillusionment and premature burnout, and perpetuates the political impotence of the IS function. Perhaps worst of all, this political gap perpetuates the organization's old methods of doing business and hampers the business process reengineering and cycle-time reduction efforts which constitute the most valuable contribution that the IS function has to offer an organization.

The intent of this paper is threefold: first, a set of commonly used political tactics, strategies, and styles is outlined; second, an overview of the effects of organizational politics on individuals and organizations is provided; and third, a set of guidelines designed to increase the political awareness and effectiveness of IS professionals is delineated. These guidelines unveil a portrait of the "IS Machiavelli," an IS

professional who, through the judicious use of appropriate types of effective political strategies, simultaneously maximizes the achievement of organizational objectives, the freedom of action of the IS function within the organization, and his or her personal career goals.

The tactical outline, overview of effects, and the set of guidelines presented here are all based on an extensive review of current literature on the topic. The outline of tactics, strategies, and styles begins by providing a working definition of organizational politics. After defining organizational politics, the authors move on to discuss the special relevance of political issues to practitioners in the information systems field. Next, the authors provide an overview of common strategies, tactics, and styles of organizational politicians. In closing, the authors unveil the "IS Machiavelli" by providing a set of seven guidelines designed to increase the political awareness and effectiveness of IS professionals.

## ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICS

Almost everyone who has interacted with others in the context of an organization knows what the term "organizational politics" means. A precise, comprehensive definition of organizational politics, however, is somewhat difficult to formulate. The literature provides a large number of organizational politics definitions which vary quite widely in both focus and scope. These definitions tend to take either a rational view of organizational politics or a sociological one — that politics is, respectively, either a dysfunctional organizational aberration or a natural product of interpersonal interaction. There is ample evidence supporting both viewpoints. Negative individual and organizational effects of organizational politics have been provided by a number of researchers (Feldman 1988, Klein 1988, Gilmore & Ferris 1989, Kumar & Ghadially 1989, Drory 1993). However, many positive effects of organizational politics on individuals and organizations have been detected as well (Kipnis & Schmidt 1988, Kumar & Ghadially 1989, Schmidt 1991, Ferris & Kacmar 1992). The consensus opinion is that the two views are not necessarily mutually exclusive and that from a practical standpoint, managers should strive to better understand politics in order to prevent its most dysfunctional outcomes (Ferris & King, 1991).

In their recent review of organizational politics definitions, Drory and Romm (1990) suggest that while a universally acceptable, specific, concrete definition of organizational politics may be unattainable as well as undesirable, a combination of three distinct elements — influence, informal means of operation, and conflict — is sufficient to outline the essence of organizational politics in all forms of its practice. Organizational politics can thus be broadly defined as actions taken outside the formal power structure on an

individual or coalition level which are "designed to influence others, especially those at higher levels, to promote or maintain one's vital interests" (Schmidt, 1991). For the organization, the inherent political challenge is to make sure that the goals of the political player mesh with organizational objectives, thereby reducing the negative aspects of organizational politics and ensuring that the organization will benefit from individual political action (Kacmar & Ferris, 1993).

## ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICS AND THE INFORMATION SYSTEMS FUNCTION

The information systems function has a number of characteristics which mark it as a politics-intensive environment. First, the typical work environment of information systems professionals is dynamic, often unstructured, and marked by a high degree of uncertainty. Such an unstructured environment strongly encourages political gamesmanship (Allen & Porter, 1983). Without the security and certainty provided by firm rules and operating procedures, ambitious organization members begin to expand their means of influencing others within the organization in order to ensure that their agenda is addressed. Political tactics provide a convenient method for organization members to "hedge their bets" (Schmidt, 1991) and make sure that their concerns receive attention. Another finding which has implications for information systems professionals is that staff positions are more inherently political than line positions (Madison et al., 1980). This increased propensity for political action within staff departments may be related to their relative lack of structure and formalization when compared with line departments and core business functions.

Schmidt (1991) reports that political activity is greatly increased when organizational resources are being reallocated or the organizational structure is being modified. Since the IS function's role in an organization often involves some sort of internal restructuring (such as business process re-engineering) and resource reallocation (often involving both information and fiscal resources), it is reasonable to assume that the IS function operates in a highly politics-intensive environment. The recommendations of IS professionals can increase or decrease the power and status of numerous influential organizational entities by restructuring or rerouting the corporate information flow, a primary source of power within an organization. As Sankar puts it, "where computer technology changes the information flow, it will create changes in other sources of power within the organization" (1991). Those affected parties will almost certainly seek to maintain or enhance their position in the revised organization through both formal and political means (Madison et al., 1980).

The politics-intensive nature of the IS function is par-

ticularly troublesome given that information systems professionals tend to be less politically oriented than their non-technical peers. Technical professionals are more likely to view their organization in terms of the rational model rather than the political model. Often, the feeling among persons subscribing to the rational model is that "decent, hardworking, competent people need not stoop to being political" (Schmidt 1991). However, such a position ignores the reality that the perception of individuals is totally subjective and that human beings often make decisions based on other than rational criteria. When utilizing such an apolitical approach, IS professionals actually put themselves at a disadvantage within the organization. Those parties opposed to organizational change will often take political action to erect "a formidable barrier to implementation" which, unless it is explicitly accounted for, has the potential to "neutralize the other change techniques — behavioral, logical, [and] technical" (Sankar, 1991). The judicious use of politics, however, is an indispensable tool for IS professionals to use in overcoming these barriers and garnering organizational support for an IS.

Probably the most well-researched framework for categorizing political action within the information systems function is the "implementation games" model. The implementation games metaphor was originally a political science concept; Bardach (1977) initially originated the games as a commonly observed set of political strategies designed to resist the implementation of new laws. Keen (1981) later refined the games metaphor and adapted it for use in the IS field by modifying the games to reflect strategies commonly employed to resist systems implementation projects. The Keen framework was tested empirically by Grover, Lederer, and Sabherwal (1988) who utilized personal interviews with MIS professionals to determine whether the games were representative of actual political issues and strategies encountered in systems implementation projects. Kettinger and Balsch (1992) subsequently applied the Keen framework of implementation games to explain various political difficulties they encountered in setting up a local area network (LAN) at the College of Business Administration at the University of South Carolina. In each case where the political games metaphor has been used to describe the problems encountered by systems implementors, it has highlighted the politics-intensive nature of the IS function and has provided proof of the critical importance of being politically savvy when implementing new systems.

Organizational politics, then, is an important tool designed to facilitate objective achievement; for IS professionals, "the politics of implementing change is primarily the use of power and patterns of influence to achieve the objectives of the change program or innovation" (Sankar, 1991). Nor is the political tool inherently indecent or immoral — organizational politics is, at once, "a legitimate domain of activity

for the change agent" and "simply an implementation strategy, and a viable one, that must be effectively utilized to achieve the objectives of the change effort" (Sankar, 1991).

Jaillet (1993) makes the argument that IS *must* become a politics-intensive function in order to survive and prosper. She argues that discretionary funding for the IS function will rapidly decline over the next several years because of increasing budget constraints and corporate pressures to downsize. At the same time, because IS professionals have tended to place less emphasis on corporate politics and have often failed to effectively market their contribution to the organization, top management and other organizational entities have an increased tendency to view IS primarily as a cost center. The key to the future of IS, she argues, is to utilize organizational politics in order to make top management and other departments realize that IS is an *essential* cost center — an invaluable resource for the organization. Given that such an assertion is true and that the IS function is able to communicate that fact to the proper organizational authorities through the judicious use of organizational politics, the IS function will have placed itself in a proactive position within the organization, more squarely in control of its own destiny and more able to act in the best interests of the organization as a whole.

### ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICS: TACTICS, STRATEGIES, AND STYLES

In order to provide a more thorough overview of political action in organizations, an examination of political tactics, strategies, and styles commonly utilized in organizations has been undertaken by the authors. This overview is based on an exhaustive review of current literature on the topic and is presented as a resource to enhance the arsenal of both the neophyte and the experienced organizational politician.

#### Tactics of Organizational Politicians

**Arsenal of tactics.** In their seminal study on political tactics in organizations, Allen et al. (1979) identified eight behaviors as common political tactics in organizations. These tactics include the following: blaming or attacking others; withholding, distorting, or overwhelming another with information; creating and maintaining a positive image; developing a support or power base; using ingratiating behaviors; forming coalitions; consorting with influential people; and creating obligations. In addition, the use of coercion by offering rewards or threatening punitive actions was named as a recognized political tactic in organizations, though it was not acknowledged as a commonly used tactic. Together, these nine behavioral tactics constitute the basic arsenal of the organizational politician.

**Choice of tactics.** After identifying the nine types of tactical political behaviors in organizations, Allen et al. (1979)

went on to classify each tactic as either proactive or reactive in nature depending on whether the tactic is primarily utilized as a reactive defensive measure or as a proactive offensive measure. The majority of the aforementioned political tactics were found to be proactive in nature; examples of proactive tactics include attacking others, creating and maintaining a favorable image, developing a base of support, using ingratiating behaviors, and coalition building. Reactive tactics include blaming others, information distortion, and drawing support from a coalition. The authors went on to demonstrate that the choice of political tactics by an individual will tend to differ depending on the situation and his or her political agenda — whether that political actor is primarily promoting or maintaining his or her self-interests. In addition, the authors noted that an individual's choice of political tactics tends to differ at varying positions in the organizational hierarchy. Lower-level managers tended to make more use of proactive behaviors such as ingratiating behaviors, impression management, and favor reciprocity while higher ranking managers and CEOs tended to use more reactive behaviors than proactive behaviors. Higher-level managers tended to rely on attacking and blaming behaviors, coercion, and coalition building (Allen et al., 1979). These findings lead to three important conclusions: first, that an individual's choice of political tactics will vary depending on various subjective characteristics of the actor and the situation at hand; second, that political action in organizations seems to be primarily proactive, and third, that aggressive political action in organizations is more prevalent at lower organizational levels. These findings are supported by the work of other researchers; Du Brin reports that "younger and lower-ranking workers have stronger political tendencies" (1988) while Baum reiterates the fact that "acting politically means acting *aggressively*." (1989).

#### Strategies of Organizational Politicians

**Strategic frameworks.** The use of particular combinations of the aforementioned political tactics in organizations in a specific situation by an individual constitutes that individual's political strategy. Several existing frameworks of political strategies in organizations can help an organizational politician define the strategic possibilities inherent in any situation depending upon his or her personal agenda. These all-inclusive strategy classifications are typically two-factor models defined along a single dimension. For example, the differentiation between proactive and reactive political behaviors (Allen et al., 1979) is a strategic distinction between self-promoting (proactive) behaviors and self-defense (reactive) behaviors. Similarly, a distinction between aggressing and alliance building strategies has been drawn by Boozer, Taylor, and Jackson (1989). In this structure, alliance building strategies involve relationship-oriented tactics such as

using ingratiating behaviors, coalition building activities, and consorting with the influential while aggressing strategies consist of power-brokering tactics such as blaming or compelling others and distorting information. Yet another strategic distinction is drawn by Perreault and Miles (1978) between open / formal and closed / deceptive / informal means of influence. The "open informal means" strategy is characterized by the use of information and knowledge and is based on the influencer's possession of expert and referent power. The "deceptive" or "closed informal means" strategy is based on increasing one's influence with another through a hidden agenda of deliberate image and impression manipulation and the "retention and selective presentation of information" (Peattie, 1993).

**Specific options.** Some specific political strategies which have been revealed by research include impression management (Ferris & King, 1991; Gilmore & Ferris, 1989), blocking (Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980), organizational structure change (Kumar & Ghadially, 1989), cooptation (Kumar & Ghadially, 1989), and secrecy / duplicity (Feldman, 1988). In each case, these strategies are shown to vary in applicability and effectiveness depending on the influencer's position in the organization and the unique characteristics of the situation to which they are to be applied.

The first strategy, impression management, is primarily used by subordinates in an attempt to create a positive impression on their superiors. Typical tactics in an impression management strategy include the use of ingratiating behaviors, creation and maintenance of a positive image, the use of information, and associating with the influential. Impression management has been revealed as an extremely useful political strategy for the purposes of career enhancement; specifically, the impression management strategy has been shown to be effective in increasing the influencer's chances to be hired in employment interviews (Gilmore & Ferris, 1989), and has also demonstrated a positive effect on performance evaluations (Ferris & King, 1991). This strategy, then, indirectly encourages others to take action favorable to the organizational politician. Blocking, on the other hand, is an attempt by an influencer to stop an individual from taking some action which the influencer perceives as undesirable. This strategy may be carried out through the use of such tactics as coercion, information distortion, coalition activity, or ingratiating behavior. Blocking is a fairly straightforward, widely applicable strategy which is usually attempted by individuals who are relatively low in the formal power structure of an organization (Kipnis et al., 1980).

Two strategies which are useful in countering the blocking strategy are organizational structure change and cooptation. The structure change strategy is an attempt to alter the power of another individual by changing his or her position in the organizational hierarchy. This strategy is

typically used by persons who are relatively high in the formal power structure. Examples of this type of strategy include demoting or causing the demotion of an uncooperative subordinate or peer or transferring him or her to an insignificant position elsewhere in the organization. Cooptation is another strategy primarily used by upper management. It involves using rewards to induce the leader of a rebellious faction or coalition to cooperate with the wishes of the influencer, thereby undermining the morale of the dissenting group (Kumar & Ghadially, 1989). Both of these strategies are aimed at removing sources or potential sources of conflict so that the organizational politician may more freely pursue his agenda.

The secrecy / duplicity strategy, on the other hand, is more directly concerned with the resolution of conflict rather than the avoidance of conflict. In fact, it is concerned with the resolution of conflict in a way that the influencer deems favorable. Feldman (1988) defines secrecy as "the purposeful creation or distortion of information to manipulate the behavior of others in order to accomplish one's goals that would be difficult or impossible to accomplish otherwise." The secrecy / duplicity strategy is applicable to a wide variety of situations and its effectiveness is fairly consistent throughout the organizational hierarchy.

### Styles of Organizational Politicians

**Style classifications.** The use of individual tactics and particular strategies over time reveals an individual's political style. Style is differentiated from strategy in that strategy is a short-term or situational consideration of an individual whereas style demonstrates long-term individual partiality toward a certain favored mix of political strategies and tactics. The effectiveness of several political styles has been researched by Kipnis and Schmidt (1988). They identified four basic political styles: "Shotgun" types who are extremely political and who primarily use threatening and bargaining behaviors; "Ingratiator" types who are highly political and who rely largely on ingratiating and impression management tactics; "Tactician" types who are moderately political and who emphasize competence, logic, reason, and the use of information; and "Bystander" types who are minimally political and, therefore, use few political tactics.

**Style effectiveness.** According to the Kipnis and Schmidt study, the most effective political styles in terms of gaining favorable performance evaluations were found to be the "Tactician" style for males and the "Ingratiator" style for female subordinates. Notably, managers utilizing a "Tactician" style reported a significantly higher average salary (between \$5,000 and \$7,000 per year) and significantly lower levels of physical and psychological stress and job tension than did managers subscribing to the other three styles. The "Shotgun" style was reported to be the least effective;

“Shotguns” turned in the lowest performance evaluations, the lowest average salary figures, and notably higher levels of each type of stress than did practitioners of the other political styles (Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988).

### MACHIAVELLI REVEALED

The findings revealed in the previous section clearly suggest that the most prudent course of action for an ambitious IS professional would be to adopt a “Tactician” political style and engage in a moderate amount of political activity marked by high job involvement, corresponding individual and organizational goals, relevant individual knowledge, competence, possession of relevant information, and reasonable and logical use of that information. Such an IS professional would eventually occupy a position of strength in the organization, thereby enhancing his or her department’s ability to look at problems and opportunities from an impartial organization-wide perspective, conduct systems analysis and design procedures in an objective manner, provide unbiased counsel which carries great weight with top management, and protect itself from political attack. Such an individual — an “IS Machiavelli” if you will — stands to enhance his or her personal power and effectiveness within the organization. In addition, since this political style primarily utilizes open, proactive, non-aggressing strategies, makes use of very few (if any) militant strategies and tactics, focuses on self-promotion through knowledge, expertise, and effort rather than mere “apple polishing” or the defamation of others, and encourages a positive work ethic in one’s self and others, this style would provide substantial benefit to the organization as well as the political player and likely mitigate many of the negative side effects typically associated with the perception of organizational politics.

The following is a set of guidelines designed to enhance the political awareness and aptitude of IS professionals and enable them to become “IS Machiavellis” in their own organizations. These guidelines were compiled from a thorough review of recent literature on organizational politics and its impact upon the information systems profession.

The first four guidelines are concerned with organizing one’s base of power so as to achieve maximum political effectiveness. This political tactic provides the foundation for the three remaining guidelines which are action-oriented suggestions based on various political tactics which are undertaken to achieve a desired strategic result. A graphical representation of the political framework as well as the tactical basis and strategic effect of the seven guidelines is provided in Figure 1. The political tactics and strategies are grouped and arranged along a right-to-left continuum designed to identify which political style, “Ingratiator” or “Tactician,” most commonly utilizes that particular tactic or strategy. The four political styles cap off the pyramid and provide a graphic

representation of their political tendencies. As shown on the Figure, “Ingratiator” types tend to utilize strategies and tactics originating from the left side of the pyramid while “Tactician” types tend to use strategies and tactics hailing from the right side. “Shotgun” styles utilize the full spectrum of tactics while the “Bystander” types utilize few, if any, political techniques. Significantly, the chart also graphically reinforces the authors’ recommendation of a “Tactician” political approach for IS professionals. Notice the frequency with which the tactical bases and strategic effects presented in the guidelines tend to appear on the right hand side of the pyramid. The seven guidelines are listed below in order of their recommended chronological occurrence.

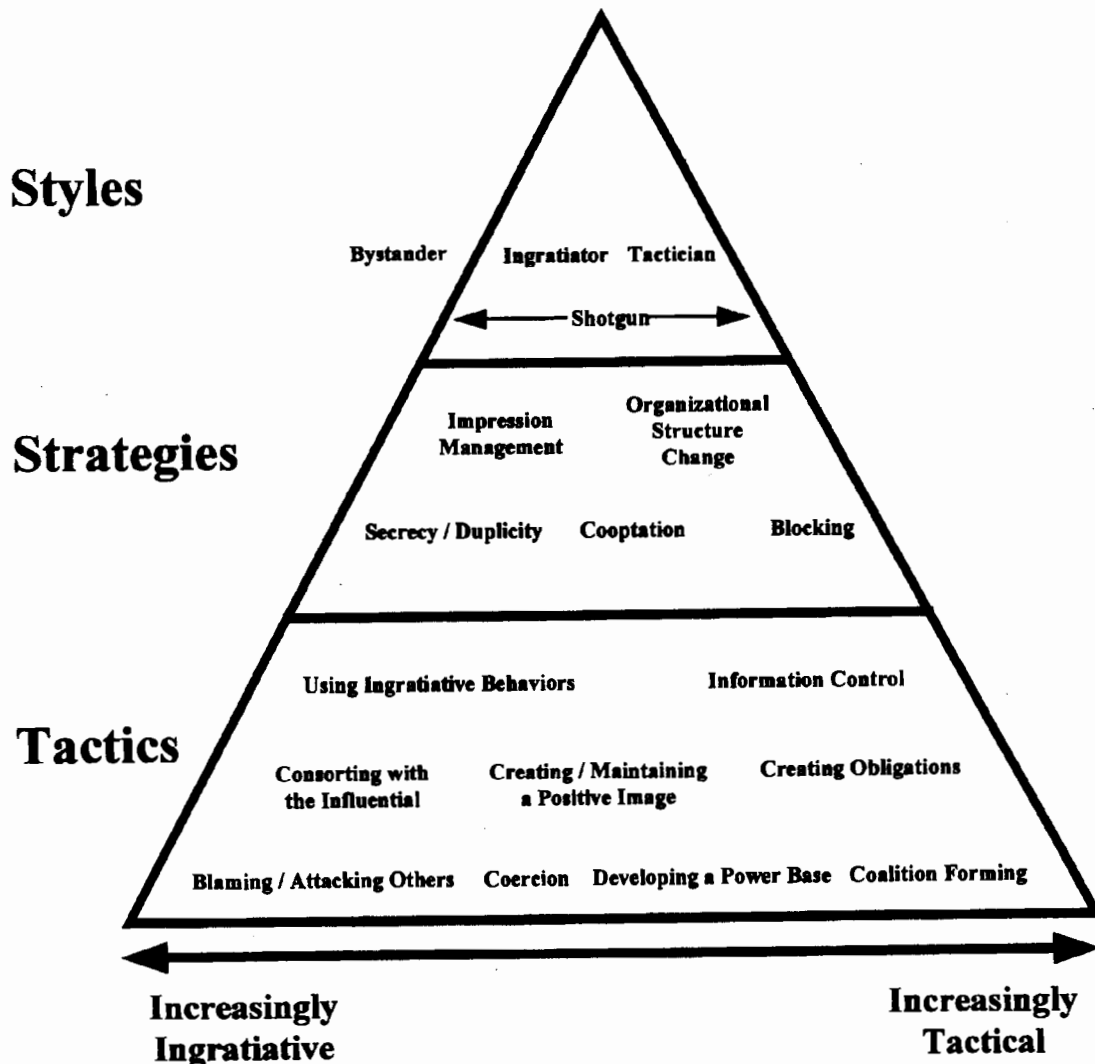
**Take a political inventory.** A current political inventory is an essential prerequisite for taking political action in an organization. This guideline is based on the tactical consideration of developing a power base. Consequently, this inventory should include the major bases of power within the organization, the sources of that power, and their predisposition toward technology (Sankar, 1991). The key is finding out which individuals are “in the loop” and therefore truly influential (Jaillet, 1993). A good starting point is the organizational chart. From there, one should “read, listen, and observe” in order to flesh out the formal chart into a useful model of the informal power structure. Also significant are the membership lists of powerful formal organizational entities such as committees, boards, and teams as well as informal coalitions. Knowledge of the power and disposition of each of the members of these groups should provide important evidence about what kind of support or resistance can be expected from each entity.

Suppose, for instance, an organization was debating whether or not to install a new groupware product on its network in order to enhance workgroup functionality. A current political inventory of the organization would provide the IS department with the names of influential organization members who would be likely to support the introduction of such a package as well as who would be in a position to “Evangelize” the project to other influential organization members. The political inventory would be equally useful in helping the IS professionals anticipate pockets of resistance to the project within the organization.

**Know the organization.** In order for an IS professional to be as politically effective as is possible, he or she must not only take a political inventory of individuals and coalitions but also know the organization itself and how it operates. Knowledge of standard operating procedures, rules, and formal and informal communication hubs is invaluable in building one’s power base and conducting an effective political campaign. Such an understanding of organizational procedures and communication centers allows the organizational politician to control the pace at which a particular

**FIGURE 1**  
**Political Strategies, Tactics, and Styles and Author Guidelines**

Author Guideline	Tactical Base	Strategic Effect
Take a Political Inventory	Developing a Power Base	—
Know the Organization	Developing a Power Base	—
Analyze the Situation	Developing a Power Base	—
Align IS Goals with Corporate Objectives	Developing a Power Base	—
Utilize Coalitions Liberally	Coalition Forming Developing a Power Base	Structure Change
Negotiate Effectively	Information Control Creating Obligations Structure Change	Blocking Cooptation
Promote the Value and Efforts of IS	Creating / Maintaining a Positive Image	Impression Management



proposal or plan moves through the organization. If the political actor favors the proposal or plan, he or she can take steps to expedite its approval and can "use the rumor mill" to quickly spread word about the proposal to the rest of the organization (Steinger, 1989). On the other hand, if the political actor wishes to slow the progress of the plan or proposal, he or she can "use the bureaucracy" as a convenient and furtive method of accomplishing this objective.

In our hypothetical groupware project scenario, a thorough knowledge of the organization would be important to the IS professionals because a knowledge of communication hubs would allow them to quickly mobilize support for the plan. In addition, a knowledge of organizational standards and procedures would show the IS department where to utilize their political capital in order to achieve maximum leverage and effectiveness.

**Analyze the situation.** The key to being a savvy organizational politician lies in being able to ascertain what will be received positively by others in the organization and what will not. The deployment of one's tactical power base should be based on the situational analysis. The ability to conduct situational analysis largely instinctive but is greatly enhanced by one's knowledge of the organization and the disposition of individuals within the organization as well as one's experience with past proposals and plans. One should analyze, on the front end, whether or not a potential "war" is worth fighting and avoid squandering political capital on it if it is untenable. Once committed to a project, the political player should be open to negotiation, and should be willing to lose a "battle" in order to win the "war." If after committing to a project it becomes obvious that the "war" is unwinnable, one should choose a particular battle to win along the way, thereby giving the organizational politician some degree of influence over the final outcome. Finally, after winning the "war," one should be sure to build bridges to those who opposed the project and patch up relations in order to avoid sparking counterproductive long-term feuds (Steinger, 1989).

A situational analysis would be valuable to the IS department in our hypothetical example because it would allow them to determine, given the information they have been able to collect, whether or not the groupware project has the potential to be successful given the power and influence of the individuals lined up both for and against the project. The question then becomes, is the project worth its estimated cost? If it becomes clear that the project is not politically cost effective, then the IS department can either drop the project immediately, attempt to negotiate an equitable settlement, or wait for a politically expedient time to withdraw.

**Align IS goals with corporate objectives.** Another key to forming one's power base, alignment of IS or project goals with corporate goals is perhaps the most prevalent

piece of political advice found in the literature. In order for IS professionals to maximize their political effectiveness, their goals should be aligned with corporate goals and this agreement should be readily apparent to those in power within the organization. One should, insofar as is possible, "tailor the intrapreneurial agenda to match that of top management" or, if that is not possible, try to persuade top management to "adopt the intrapreneurial agenda as their own" (Prasad, 1993). This agreement should be reflected both in new projects, thus making them more easily justifiable and defensible (Thomas 1992, Martinsons 1993), and throughout the IS function as a whole, thereby reinforcing positive perceptions of its value to the company (Jaillet, 1993).

In our groupware hypothetical, the goals of the project should be brought into line with the goals of the organization. This harmonization with corporate goals must be readily apparent to anyone scrutinizing the project, and it should also be expressly and frequently communicated to influential organization members. This refocusing helps ensure that the project will make a desirable contribution to the organization and thus would be worthy of the corporate resources invested in it. In addition, this realignment reinforces the plan's strategic position, thus making the project more easily defensible.

**Utilize coalitions liberally.** Coalition formation and utilization is a basic political tactic which has a high degree of applicability in IS scenarios (Thomas, 1993). One of the quickest ways to magnify one's base of power and influence is to form alliances with "people who have similar agendas, plans, or concepts" (Steinger, 1989). One's political inventory should provide substantial clues about which organization members would be the likeliest allies. Once formed, these coalitions provide a convenient means to "gather information, try out concepts and ideas, gather support, defuse negative reactions" (Steinger, 1989) and "sell the user community on [a] proposed idea" (Martinsons, 1993). The expected strategic outcome from coalition activity is typically an organizational structure change in which the coalition is empowered to take some action which it was unable to effect as a group of individuals.

Coalitions should be heavily utilized in the case of the groupware hypothetical because there is undeniable strength in numbers. Coalitions can often be empowered by creating and invoking a common vision to which all coalition members subscribe and from which they draw support. The formation of multiple coalitions would benefit the IS department by providing them with increased intelligence gathering capabilities, greatly enhanced brainstorming faculties, and a groundswell of support for the project.

**Negotiate effectively.** Bargaining skills are a valuable political asset for IS professionals. Even within the context of a single implementation, bargaining can take place on



numerous levels — between top management and IS function liaisons, between a coalition and an organizational entity, among multiple political coalitions, and with end users (Thomas, 1993). Depending on the situation, effective negotiating typically is based on tactics such as information control and creating obligations. Negotiations can achieve a wide variety of strategic results including blocking, cooperation, and organizational structure change. Negotiating skills are particularly useful in dealing with delicate user matters which cannot be properly addressed by downward pressure from top management. Such “smoothing out” negotiations can head off anticipated resistance to a project and save a lot of time in the long run (Thomas, 1993). Open bargaining is also beneficial to the organization because it often heads off the proliferation of negative politics by providing an above-board mechanism through which managers, organizational entities, and coalitions can ensure that their position is expressed and their agenda addressed. Open bargaining has the effect of “increasing communication and access to information for all employees.” Consequently, it will help reduce the uncertainty and ambiguity associated with the negative use of politics” (Newman & Carpenter 1993).

Bargaining skills would be invaluable to the IS professionals in the case of the hypothetical groupware implementation scenario. These skills would be useful on a daily basis during every aspect of project implementation from bargaining with upper management for required resources at the outset of the implementation to negotiating with influential organization members during the implementation process in order to ensure a smooth and trouble-free product installation.

**Promote the value and efforts of IS.** In order to gain the respect and confidence of influential members of the organization, it is important for the IS function to conduct an ongoing marketing campaign. This ongoing campaign is a classic example of the creating and maintaining a positive image tactic. The strategic effect of this continuing promotion is an impression management strategy. It is important to note that this campaign must be proactive in nature. Jaillet (1993) lists a number of steps that IS professionals can take to “increase [their] perceived value to the corporation.” After taking a political inventory and identifying influential organization members, one should take steps to make sure that these powerful persons both are aware of the contributions and potential contributions of the IS department and feel positive about its value to the organization. Jaillet (1993) lists a number of strategies designed to build awareness of the IS function; these strategies include providing valuable unsolicited assistance to key departments within the organization, scheduling a briefing on a current hot topic in the field, publishing a newsletter bearing the IS logo, and becoming involved in writing departmental and corporate business plans. These impression management strategies al-

low one to “manage the boss” (Steininger, 1989) more effectively and provide a valuable “reservoir of goodwill” (Radding, 1991) which is the source of organizational bargaining power. Maintaining a positive image within the corporation is particularly important in the political model because such a favorable impression is absolutely essential if one is to achieve the ends of the political means — an increase in organizational and personal power and effectiveness.

One can see the value of marketing the contribution of the IS department in the case of our hypothetical groupware project example. The sponsoring department’s good reputation would be the best project lubricant available. A good reputation with upper management would solidify the IS function’s bargaining position and increase upper management’s confidence that the IS department would be able to deliver the product as it was promised. If the IS department were highly valued throughout the organization, its political clout in dealing with influential organization members will be increased. In addition, if the IS department’s reputation for performance were strong, it would enjoy a good rapport with end users which would reduce front-line resistance to the project and assist in troubleshooting the product once it were implemented.

## CONCLUSION: THE ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICS

Today’s organizations are, by necessity, more flexible and less burdened with formal structure than ever before. In addition, these modern organizations face an increasingly dynamic and uncertain external environment. In the face of this uncertainty and dynamism, organizational politics plays a more influential role than ever before in getting one’s objectives accomplished within an organizational context. The prevalence of politics in organizations is particularly widespread in situations where the problems are unstructured, where the valuable resource of information is involved, and where solutions may potentially include organizational restructuring. The information systems function is responsible, in large part, for dealing with exactly those situations described above; therefore, IS exists within a peculiarly political environment. Thus, it is particularly important for IS professionals to be politically skilled in order to be effective.

The seven guidelines listed previously are designed to increase the political effectiveness of IS professionals and assist them in honing their valuable political skills. The application of these guidelines will assist IS professionals in every aspect of their jobs. On an operational day-to-day level, the increased political skills of the IS professionals and the enhanced reputation of the IS function will make in the implementation process of each project proceed more smoothly than would otherwise be the case. On a tactical

level, the IS department's political clout and improved organizational standing will give IS professionals more flexibility to take advantage of the ad-hoc opportunities which arise within the organization to use technology to enhance the flow of information and maximize organizational processing power. Strategically, a politically empowered IS department would be regarded as a full partner by top management in laying out medium- and long-term plans for the firm, thus making it easier for IS to maintain and improve the levels of performance it currently achieves in maximizing the organization's information processing ability. A lack of political awareness on the part of the IS department, however, increases operational resistance to the implementation of new projects, removes the IS professional's freedom to act on new tactical opportunities, sullies the reputation and undermines the contributions of the IS department, and disenfranchises the IS function as a strategic partner. The seven guidelines given previously will prevent this eventuality from occurring within an organization if they are consistently and comprehensively applied. No single guideline is more important than the others; each builds on the foundation provided by the previous guidelines. Political action cannot be taken without a political inventory or a knowledge of the organization's communication centers and operating procedures. Only such information, once it is gained, will allow a proper situational analysis to be performed. Likewise, only the previously garnered information will provide a true picture of the corporate objectives so that project goals can be aligned with them. Additionally, such previously garnered intelligence information is required when mobilizing coalition action within an organization. The fruit of this coalition action and goal realignment is borne at the negotiating table; however, even at this late stage the ongoing intelligence gathering operation helps provide leverage to enhance the IS function's bargaining position. The positive outcome of these negotiations provides the IS function with the resources necessary to build more effective and efficient systems, the payoff for which is seen in the enhanced reputation of the department. The achievement of building good, timely, usable systems enhances the IS department's reputation, and it greatly leverages the IS function's ongoing marketing campaign to promote its efforts and contribution. These successes and impression management efforts, in turn, perpetuate the good standing of the department and enhances its organizational standing and political power.

It is important to note however, that possessing political skills does not reduce the IS professional's need to possess technical expertise. Indeed, if the objective of political action is positive in nature — if it is intended to increase both personal and organizational power and effectiveness — then technical skills are necessary in equal measure with political savvy. Prasad (1993) eloquently sums up the situation:

Being technically competent, to the almost total exclusion of political skills, makes one a worker ant; being a political animal with limited or nonexistent technical capabilities makes one a hustler. In essence, the ability to play and counter organizational politics may be one of the many behavioral characteristics that could differentiate individuals with the potential to be *transformational leaders* from paper-shuffling *administrators*, or *intrapreneurs* from *technicians*.

Political skills are, to some degree, innate and instinctive; however, they can also be acquired and refined through practice. It is vital for IS professionals to make themselves into more complete and well-rounded individuals by honing these political skills along with technical expertise, thereby ensuring their future effectiveness as IS professionals as well as both personal and organizational benefit over the long term.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Keith Overton** received his BBA degree from the University of Memphis in 1990 with a major in Human Resource management. He received his MBA with a concentration in MIS in 1994 also from the University of Memphis. He is currently employed with Morgan Keegan & Co., a Memphis-based brokerage firm as a Business Systems Analyst specializing in client/server application development.

**Mark N. Frolick, Ph.D.**, is an Associate Professor of Management Information Systems at The University of Memphis and a Project Manager with the FedEx Center for Cycle Time Research. His research, teaching, and consulting have emphasized executive information systems, cycle time reduction, systems analysis and design, and telecommuting. He has published extensively in numerous journals, including MIS Quarterly, Journal of Management Information Systems, Decision Support Systems, Information and Management, and Information Systems Management. He has published over 30 refereed journal articles. Dr. Frolick has over 15 years' experience in the information systems field and has worked as an independent consultant for numerous Fortune 500 companies.