

POLITICAL ANALYSIS FOR COLLABORATIVE PROCESS MANAGERS: THINKING STRATEGICALLY ABOUT THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

Introduction

- With limited time, resources, and energy, you need to be strategic in how you work with community groups, elected officials, the media, and other outside parties to build support for what you are doing, protect yourself from criticism, and avoid pitfalls. Political analysis is one way to develop a strategic approach to external players.
- Political analysis is a process of *disaggregating* the *key players* in a community or policy environment, *identifying* how they *influence* progress toward your goals, and *developing strategies* to interact with them to advance your goals.
- There are many different ways to do political analysis. This is something that can take a few hours or a few months, involving a group of people brainstorming around a table or a team of researchers conducting interviews in the community.
- We are presenting one method of analysis that is aimed at developing a quick, but relatively rich, understanding of the broader social and political context for your work. You should explore other approaches and experiment, as you get comfortable with the core ideas of the approach. Many of the concepts overlap the field of “stakeholder” analysis, a large and growing topic in the social sciences and business.
- You should do this kind of analysis on a periodic basis, as situations change and new issues emerge.

The Process

- Political analysis involves two main stages: *Description* and *Analysis*. Description is the identification of *who*, *what*, *when*, and *how*. Analysis is the investigation of *why*. This is what lays the groundwork for developing appropriate strategic responses.
- There are seven key elements in the political analysis framework:
 - Actors
 - Motivations/Interests
 - Participation
 - Resources
 - Strategies & Tactics
 - Influence
 - Action Channels
- In a nutshell, you will disaggregate your situation into these pieces and then identify key leverage points for your resources.

Actors

- As a first step, you should brainstorm on all of the potential outside actors that may have an interest in what you are doing. The relevant actors broadly include anyone who will be affected by or can affect your project. You should ask yourself:
 - Who *benefits* from your project or program?
 - Who will pay the *costs*?
Who might *think* they will be positively or negatively impacted by your project?
 - What individual(s) occupy *organizational roles* that give them a stake?
 - Who shares *power/formal authority* to make decisions affecting what we do?
- Your initial goal should be to develop as complete a list of actors as you can. Cast a wide net, brainstorm everyone that might have an interest in what you are doing. You can always eliminate parties as you move through the process and develop a sense their relative importance, but you do not want to omit anyone at this stage.

Objectives/Motives/Interests

- Once you have developed a list of actors or stakeholders, you need to identify what forces and interests motivate them. What does each participant want out of a process or program? Why do they care what happens?
- There are several broad topics you should consider as a way of isolating the interests of the actors that you identified in the first step. Ask yourself:
 - What *financial* and *material* interests does each party have at stake?
 - What are the *social* and *psychological* needs of each party? status, prestige, etc.
 - What are the *political* and *organizational* needs and interests of each party?
 - What *ideological goals* or *values* influence how each actor thinks?
- In thinking about each actor's motivations, you should be aware of the distinction between *positions* and *interests*. Positions are the outwards stances that individuals take, but interests are the issues that really motivate an individual in a dispute. Interests often underlie positions; but positions do not always reflect someone's true interests.

Participation and resources

- Individuals who have some interest or motivation might not necessarily be involved or active in a particular issue or project. In addition to their level of interest or motivation, each party's ability to participate will depend on:
 - Their likelihood of success
 - The visibility of the issue
 - The costs of participating
 - What opportunities they have to participate

- The extent and nature of each actor's participation will also depend on the *resources* that they have to generate outcomes that favor their objectives/interests. Key resources can include:
 - Money
 - People: grassroots membership or powerful individual champions
 - Access
 - Expertise: technical, legal, procedural
 - Reputation/credibility
 - Moral authority
 - Relationships with other actors

Strategies and influence

- Actors can expand their resources through strategic and tactical choices. They can build coalitions, link their proposals to other issues, change the venue or site of a dispute, or seek to develop broader support through media connections.

Action channels

- Public choices and decisions happen in regular places. Some common formal venues include legislatures, courts, budget processes, administrative processes (NEPA, NFMA, etc).
- Informal action channels can also provide settings for public decisions. These can include civic and community organizations, social networks, and academic or professional connections.
- Action channels pre-select participants: the process by which a decision is made defines who participates and how they participate. Action channels also distribute different advantages and disadvantages to each party.

Developing Strategy: what do you do with this all of this information?

- Once you have mapped out the whole situation, you should have a sense of the relative potential that different external actors have to influence your own goals and objectives:
 - *Supporters*. Individuals who might support your goals and have the power to help you achieve them.
 - *"Mixed blessing" or persuadable actors*. Individuals who are potentially powerful, but are unclear or ambivalent in their support or opposition to your activities.
 - *Opponents*. Individuals who are likely to oppose you and are powerful enough to be threats.

- *Marginal actors.* Individuals who may support or oppose you, but do not have the resources, power, or interest to seriously help or hinder you.
- The point of this whole exercise is to make sure that your strategies toward different stakeholders match up with their own capacity and motivations to influence your own goals and objectives. You do not want to waste your time and resources trying to involve a marginal, disinterested outside party, even if that is someone who might superficially be powerful. Similarly, you do not want to overlook any potentially powerful sources of support or opposition that operate “below the radar.”
- Think about your own resources and influence channels that you can use to reach out to external parties.

“The power of these kinds of collaborative processes is that they have access to political opportunities that we as federal employees don’t have...Each partner brings assets to the table that the other partners don’t have access to, such as each agency or organization’s traditional constituencies. For instance, the Bureau of Reclamation can reach out to the water users and Fish and Wildlife can reach out to the environmentalists.” (John Hamill, Desert Managers Group)

- For *potential supporters*, you should think about ways to turn them into effective advocates and participants. What opportunities for involvement can you give them? In what ways can they use their own relationships and connections to publicize your goals and build support for your project?
- For *mixed blessing* or *persuadable actors*, you need to identify the steps you can take to win their support. What are their reservations about getting involved? What information or outreach do they need in order to become supporters? What relationships or connections can you develop or use to bring persuadable parties into the fold?
- For individuals who are likely to be *opponents*, you should think about how you can address their concerns or neutralize their opposition. Can you turn them into supporters? Can you mitigate their opposition? What relationships do you have that can build bridges to potential opponents and minimize or modify their criticism?