

Two Perspectives of Power in Organizations and Their Relationship to Conflict

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"It is a strange desire, to seek power, and to lose liberty; or to seek power over others, and to lose power over a man's self." Francis Bacon

The Finite Perspective of Power

Our competitive spirit has made America great. Our free enterprise system, in which anyone can choose to offer their goods or services in the competitive marketplace, has been a hallmark of democracy in the United States. Today's globally competitive marketplace is a force that improves the quality of goods and services as it keeps prices lower. It is also a spur to productivity as being able to produce more for less is a fundamental survival characteristic.

The survival-orientation of competitiveness is its most potent characteristic. It is clear in its focus on winning and not losing. If a situation is one of eat-or-be-eaten, live-or-die, win-or-go-out-of-business, being a strong competitor is the way to go. Darwin's *Origin of Species* documents well this approach to survival. His phrase "survival of the fittest" describes pointedly the survival orientation of the win/lose perspective of power. Clearly, the organizations most fit to compete will be the ones to survive in a highly competitive environment. Competition, for all its value as the friend of the consumer through improving quality and protecting price levels and spurring productivity, is, nonetheless, a power perspective with decidedly diminishing returns. When friendly competition is treated as live-or-die competition and when competitiveness becomes unnecessarily predatory—unnecessary because survival is not at stake—win/lose ultimately becomes lose/lose, a very limiting, limited, and finite proposition.

FROM WIN/LOSE TO LOSE/LOSE

In situations that have only a superficial win/lose aspect to them, we respond too easily as if life and death were at stake. Unfortunately, when situations without survival aspects are treated as if they are, they will have sooner or later lose/lose results. Intra-organizational competition is a good example. Organizations are systems in which each component—department, person, or piece of equipment—is ostensibly necessary to the success of the organization. Any department or person, therefore, that wins to the detriment of another department or person within the organization creates a situation inimical to the entire organization and subsequently all of its components including the "winning" component—win/lose becomes lose/lose.

POWER STRUGGLES, CONFORMITY, AND PRODUCTIVITY

In most organizations, much time, energy, creativity, and productivity is either wasted or never developed because of power struggles. Turf battles, empire-building, dueling departments, backstabbing, self-seeking decision-making, ego trips, favoritism, passive aggression, duplication of effort,

poor judgement, poor communication, poor teamwork, personality conflicts, contentious employees, gossip, complaining, blaming, grievances, and lawsuits are just some of the things that happen in organizations that waste their time and energy. They are activities that do not allow organizations to reach their fullest potential. All are forms of power struggles or attempts at avoiding them. All come from the finite, win/lose perspective of power.

Some organizations seem peaceful on the surface. Many of these organizations tend to be riddled with excessive conformity, "group think," sycophancy, buck-passing, avoidance of responsibility, problem concealment, and apathy. In these organizations, the power struggles are still there, but in passive aggressive form. In these organizations, much productive energy is lost because many of the thoughts, ideas, opinions, and information needed for effective organization management never surface. Offering ideas, opinions, or information that stray too far from the patterns of thinking established as acceptable to those at the top—the winners—is seen as too risky, too dangerous. So is being perceived as too different from those authority figures in style of dress, speaking, thinking, and other behaviors.

POWER STRUGGLES AND DIFFERENCES

One of the hallmarks of the finite perspective of power is that differences are used to determine who wins and who loses. In fact, we have been deeply socialized regarding which side of a sizable set of differences wins and which loses. Generically, we understand that "more" wins against "less," "high" wins against "low," "fast" wins against "slow," "big" wins against "little," "first" wins against anything else. We understand these distinctions without needing a context of what is more or faster. Rationally, we even know that fast and more aren't always better than slow and less. Yet, the world of organizations still cycles through periods of mergers to build bigger and bigger companies for greater and greater "economies of scale" and "competitive advantage" that often do not occur.

Other differences are emotionally problematic—male wins over female, white wins over black, straight wins over gay, Muslims contend with Christians, Tutsis contend with Hutus, Israelis content with Palestinians. These are differences that carry substantial emotional charges that occur when arbitrary categories of people are oppressed for the aggrandizement of another group. "Diversity programs" aimed at ameliorating only race and gender issues don't begin to get at the win/lose issues driven by the finite paradigm of power.

The diversity issue most disruptive to organizational effectiveness is not fast/slow, more/less, race or gender. Rank is. Those who rank higher in organizations consistently win over those who rank lower. Those of higher ranks have the ability to reward and penalize those of lower ranks making the difference one fraught with risk. Consequently, the higher one rises within such organizations the less reliable will be the information received while silence or sycophantic agreement increases. Hence, we have the phrase "It's lonely at the top."

These phenomena are functions of the perception of danger. New managers recently promoted over their former peers often tell me how mystified and hurt they are that their friends, now subordinates, change the conversation or disassemble when they arrive on the scene. As friends, these subordinates were open and direct. Those who wish to move up within their organizations are very

clear that it pays to dress like, talk like, behave like, and think like those who are already above them. To do otherwise is seen as committing corporate suicide—notice the live-or-die terminology.

When differences are perceived as being dangerous, dramatic amounts of organizational productivity are lost to both power struggles and conformity. This doesn't have to be true, but it takes a lot of infinite play to make it otherwise.

In summary, when organizational cultures operate from the win/lose perspective that believes that power is finite and scarce, winning and losing become a productivity-consuming reality. In such environments, managers and employees operate to compete or conform, to increase or protect their power even at the cost of organizational productivity. The following chart summarizes the organizational impact the finite perspective of power:

THE FINITE PERSPECTIVE OF POWER

Description	Consequences
Power is perceived as scarce.	Power is a zero-sum, win/lose game.
Winning and losing are taken personally as issues of success or failure.	Perceptions of winning and losing triggers for contention and/or conformity.
The purpose is to determine who will be winner and who will be loser at the end of play.	A serious game, which easily evokes a sense of threat to self-esteem and identity as if life and death were at stake.
Differences are used to determine who wins and who loses.	Differences lead to tension and risky power struggles. Diversity equals adversity.
Differences are used to determine who is winner and who is loser including rank, role, race, gender, ethnicity, preferences, appearance, background, behaviors, beliefs, and opinions.	Differences and change are threatening. Conformity, with dependency on and loyalty to those perceived as winners, is seen as the safe route to success.
All play must be within the rules to maintain the validity of the game, i.e., the merit of winning and the disgrace of losing. Those caught playing outside the rules are censured, disqualified or otherwise punished.	Little creativity occurs because of need to stay inside the rules and need to focus so much on winning, not losing.
The idea "power is scarce" is a self-fulfilling prophecy because partnerships and influence are seen and	Players repeatedly choose to play finitely because it seems as if there are no other

acted upon as temporary and limited.	options.
The finite perspective is chosen whenever survival is perceived as a life and death issue. It is the paradigm of choice only when survival actually is a life and death issue.	When used when life and death are not at stake, but only ego issue are, finite play becomes a lose/lose proposition in which everyone loses in the long run.

Finite play short-circuits organizational communication, setting the stage for poor decision-making. It suppresses creativity, punishes those that take responsibility, and makes a farce of meaningful teamwork.

The finite paradigm is the power paradigm of survival—eat or be eaten. It is appropriate to some organizational situations but not to most. Organizational managers must discriminate between when win/lose is appropriate and when it is not. When we have gained "...the wisdom to know the difference," we need an alternative for those times when the finite perspective is not appropriate. The infinite perspective of power is offered as the necessary alternative to the eventual lose/lose result of playing finitely.

THE INFINITE PERSPECTIVE OF POWER

An infinite perspective of power understands power to be abundant and offers no need for power struggles. Winning and losing are not at issue when playing infinitely. In fact, the purpose of infinite play is to sustain play rather than determine who wins and who loses. Only at the end of a game is it known who are the winners and who the losers. As long as play continues there are no winners or losers in the finite sense.

To assure that play continues, that the life of the organization continues, it behooves players to cooperate with and be supportive of each other. Accordingly, infinite play works toward a positive experience for all players. Damaged or dissatisfied players threaten an end to the game or, at least, decrease its productivity. The term win/win applies only in the sense that everyone must experience satisfaction if the game is to continue.

FOUR MISUNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT INFINITE PLAY

1. Some folk believe they are playing win/win when they martyr themselves on behalf of someone else. Allowing another to repeatedly take advantage of one's self is not playing infinitely. You are still playing win/lose with yourself as the loser. To play infinitely you must insist on winning and insist that others win as well.

To insist that others win as well, organizational managers have to be on the look out for employees stepping into the same pitfall. I have listened to many stressed-out, resentful employees complain bitterly about the workloads that their managers heap upon them. As I inquire further I discover that these employees have never informed their bosses of their being overloaded. Eventually, the stress and resentment either decreases the work quality of these employees or they leave believing that

management has forced them to sacrifice themselves and their sense of well being for the good of the organization. To develop the productivity of the infinite perspective, organizational managers must take care to assure that management, employees, and organizational goals all win without any needing to sacrifice.

2. Let's also be clear that winning in the infinite perspective is more about achieving an experience of substantial satisfaction and workability than about achieving some specific picture in our minds of what we want.
3. A third misunderstanding about playing infinitely has to do with the organizational managers who promote compromise as a way of playing infinitely. Unfortunately, compromise leaves each party with half of the satisfaction and workability sought. Half is not substantial enough to achieve the productivity of the infinite perspective. Full satisfaction for everyone over the long run is the hallmark of infinite play.
4. A final misunderstanding about infinite play in organizations is the idea that disciplining (including firing) an employee is not possible since that would cause a loss to the employee. This issue is related to the already discussed issue that holds that management must not take a loss if play is to be infinite. An employee who is not performing to the level needed by the organization is creating a loss for the organization. The employee must improve or leave to find someplace where s/he is better suited. Employees will experience themselves as losing at the time of their dismissal for poor performance, and more often than not they find their way to jobs for which they are better suited—an infinite play that doesn't seem so at the time. Accountability is crucial to infinite play.

DIFFERENCES, THE ONLY SOURCE OF LEARNING

Differences are the only source of learning we have. This is worthy of repeating: *Differences are the only source of learning we have.* Neither you nor I can learn much at all from a room full of people who think the same or have the same opinions and background as we do. Only if someone arrives who is different will we have any opportunity for learning. Likewise, in corporate meetings and functional teams where conformity is rampant little learning is possible.

In the same vein, learning from those with whom we are engaged in power struggles is not on the agenda. There might be some small learning about how to survive a power struggle or how to do something the way "the winners" do. Regardless, neither the system nor "the winners" will learn anything constructive. All will stay the same. Learning from differences requires an environment that welcomes and values differences rather than using them to determine who wins and who loses.

Becoming a learning organization does not have to be management flavor of the month. It does require, however, that an organization come up with ways to assure that differences are used for learning rather than contention or drivers of conformity. Becoming a learning organization requires a change in organizational culture that incorporates the infinite perspective of power.

To play infinitely with differences, when you disagree with me about something I know is right, I must be willing to focus on learning—learning about your point of view and learning about you. I don't need to agree; I just need to learn.

Learning from differences can be incredibly difficult, particularly when we are under stress and when the differences involves our sense of identity or esteem. In such situations, we cannot be depended on to learn rather than fight or conform. To learn from differences we require support systems of people who will remind us of our ability to play infinitely even when we protest.

ORGANIZATIONAL SYNERGY

If learning from differences can occur in an organization, synergy becomes possible. Synergy is another of those "flavor of the month" buzz words that rarely bear much fruit. Real synergy is the force that occurs when two or more agents act in concert so that the product of their combined energy is greater than the sum of their individual energies acting independently.

Harold Geneen's book, *The Synergy Myth*, documents well the position that synergy and other management flavors-of-the-month have produced little new productivity. This need not be so for the organization cultures that insist on using differences for learning rather than contention or conformity.

For those organizations, there are several principles of synergy that will be helpful to us. They are as follows:

The Principles of Synergy in Organizations

1. Within any organization of two or more people synergy is possible.
2. The amount of synergy possible within an organization is directly proportional to the amount of diversity within that organization.
3. The amount of synergy actually generated within an organization is directly proportional to how much the organization values and learns from its diversity.
4. All members of organizations will willingly contribute to the synergy if they perceive from their individual perspectives that...
 - a. Their points of view will be fully and authentically considered when they are offered.
 - b. Their self-interests will be maintained, maybe enhanced, certainly not harmed.

That synergy is possible is evident in the energy that small, entrepreneurial start-ups generate and use to get their fledgling organizations to grow. A small group of people feed off each other's ideas and backgrounds to invent something that none could have invented alone.

What I find fascinating is that synergy occurs in most organizations—when a real crisis hits. Virtually every organization has legends about how everyone pulled together, invented new solutions, and met the deadline when the machine broke down, when the accreditation people were coming, when the proposal had to get out, when the CEO was going to visit. We will create synergy when our mutual survival seems at stake—such irony. We need to create synergy before our mutual survival becomes at stake.

THE INFINITE PERSPECTIVE OF POWER

Description	Consequences
Power is perceived as abundant.	Power is a positive-sum, win/win game. Determining winners and losers has no value.
The purpose is to maintain the play of the game.	It is a game easy to play well and without anxiety, as no one's survival or self-esteem is at stake.
The continuance of the game is dependent upon the well-being of the players and their other relationships.	It is a game that evokes cooperation and openness while never allowing self or any player to take a loss.
Differences are used for their inherent value. They are the only source of learning that exists.	Differences lead to interest, enthusiasm, curiosity, and learning.
Differences in role, race, gender, background, conformity, ethnicity, appearance, ideas, opinions, beliefs, rank, and behavior are sources of interest, curiosity and learning.	Being different is safe and welcome. It is a matter of personal choice.
Playing with and outside the rules is allowed to assure the flexibility needed to maintain the well-being of the players, hence, play of the game itself.	Allows play with and outside the rules supporting extensive creativity and full self-expression.
The idea "power is abundant" is a self-fulfilling prophecy as partnerships are safe, stable, diverse, learningful, and unlimited.	A rewarding, highly influential way of life whenever we remember it as a possibility.
The paradigm of choice when growth and learning are primary goals.	Everyone wins, no one loses.

As I stated earlier, diversity initiatives aimed at ameliorating only race and gender issues don't begin to get at the full range of win/lose issues driven by the finite paradigm of power. Organizational energy is wasted over differences in ideas, opinions, communication style, management style, and function. A most prevalent difference used for win/lose games is rank. All of these differences, when used finitely, decrease information flow and lead to poor decision-making as well as unnecessary turmoil and turnover. With discipline and support, this waste can be stopped and turned into the new productivity that synergy can bring. Go for it. It's more than worth it in terms of both employee satisfaction and productivity!

