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The CIO as a Political Player – Work in Progress

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Abstract

A review of the literature on the Chief Information Officer (CIO) emphasizes the importance of the role of politics in the activities of the CIO). Building on the approach established in Political Strategies Framework (Romm and Rippa, 2010) an empirical research program is described that will validate assumptions about this political role. The research will validate specific actions or attitudes which constitute political activity and relate these activities to stages in the systems development lifecycle. How this Political Strategies Framework can be the basis for further research on the political dimensions of the CIO role is explained in the final section.

Keywords: Politics, IT, CIO Role, CIO Success

1 Introduction

Inspired by a public lecture given by the CIO of Johnson's Controls, in which she stated that she saw her role as "all about influencing, convincing, and selling information systems", this research focuses on the political aspects of the CIO role. Specifically, we focus on the aspects of the role that center on influencing, convincing, and selling information systems to other members of the organization. These aspects, as we explain in the following sections have been defined by previous researchers as political.

2 Role of the CIO in Organizations

Research on the role of CIO's in organizations reveals that they add value by enhancing the strategic role of IT in their organizations (Armstrong and Sambamurthy, 1999). Research has also demonstrated that CIO's are generally perceived as successful in managing the IT assets of their organizations (Khallaf and Skantz, 2007). The question that attracted much research is **how** do CIO's accomplish this feat.

In attempting to identify the key drivers of CIO's success, three types of CIO's skills have been listed as key drivers of organizational performance: (1) technical skills, (2) managerial skills, and (3) leadership skills (Bharadwaj, 2000).

It is interesting to note that CIO's do not seem to apply these skills across the board. In fact, some research has demonstrated (Pagels et al, 2000) that the most effective CIO's use judicious discretion in choosing the most effective strategy to fit a specific managerial situation. Thus, Simonsson et al. (2010) found that superior performance is a result of discretionary managerial choice based on the unique characteristics of situations.

In line with the findings from this study, Virnay and Tushman (1986) found that the behaviors of members of the executive team (including CIO's) in high performing organizations are significantly different than those of members of the executive teams in low performing organizations.

The realization that the behavior of the members of the management team in top performing organizations determines the overall performance of the organization has been synthesized by Hambrick and Mason (1984) into an "upper echelon theory". These authors argued that the best predictor of upper echelon managers' success is their demographic characteristics, including their experience, education, and technical skills. These characteristics, together with the characteristics of the organization (size, prior performance), determine the overall success of the CIO.

Further research on CIO's competencies (Boyatzis, 1982; Spencer and Spencer, 1993) demonstrated that they can be conceptualized along three major dimensions: (1) "know-what", (2) "know-how", and (3) "know how to be".

The "know what" dimension can be interpreted as related to the CIO's previous work experience (e.g., having worked in the same industry for many years). The "know-how-to-be" dimension can be interpreted as related to the CIO's education (e.g., being a graduate of a top university in an area related to the business of the organization), while the "know-what" dimension can be interpreted as related to the number of years that the CIO spent in his/her role. The assumption being that the longer the CIO plays this role, the more skilled he or she are likely to be.

Further applications of the above conceptualization demonstrated that “know-how”, “know-what” and “know-how-to-be” characteristics of CIO’s are key drivers in an organization’s superior performance (Ravarini et al. 2003). Therefore, one would expect that more effective CIO’s would possess these characteristics at a higher level than less effective ones.

It is our belief that a key element that is missing from the literature on CIO characteristics is the political dimension of the CIO role. The political dimension cannot be seen as part of any of the above three dimensions. It is not an automatic by-product of working in a similar industry (“know what”), it is not a result of the CIO’s level and quality of education (“know-how”), and it is not related to the number of years that the CIO spent in his/has role (“know-how-to-be”). It is a separate set of characteristics that cannot be categorized under any of the above dimensions.

3 Political Behavior

A review of the literature on organizational politics shows that defining this term is not simple. The literature is replete with definitions that often contradict each other. For the purpose of this paper, we follow a definition proposed by Drory and Romm (1991). The authors noted that given the lack of consensus among researchers on what organizational politics is, the best that one can do is to chart the boundaries of the construct in a “framework” that defines which behaviors are within and which behaviors are outside of the definition.

Thus, Drory and Romm (1991) noted that while there was relatively wide consensus that political behavior involved “influence attempts”, and, therefore this characteristic should be considered central to the definition of organizational politics (Allen and Porter, 1983; Farrell and Petersen, 1982; Mayes and Allen, 1977; Robbins, 1994 and others), they also noted that there are considerable variations among writers as to the means and circumstances that distinguish political from non-political behavior.

To account for the wide number of attributes that researchers do not agree are part of organizational politics, Drory and Romm (1991) created a conceptual framework or a “map” of the range of behaviors that should be considered political. Their framework considered organizational politics as a combination of three types of elements:

1. **Necessary elements** – In this category the authors included “influence attempts” and “informal means”, indicating that by definition, in order to be considered political, an actor has to attempt to **influence** another actor, using **informal means** of persuasion.
2. **Defining elements** – In this category the authors included whether the actor is an individual or a group and whether the behavior is directed upward, downward or laterally.
3. **Optional or circumstantial elements** – In this category the authors listed a number of elements mentioned in the literature, including: “the existence of a state of conflict”, “working against one’s organization”, “power attainment”, and “concealment of motive”. These were all considered important but not essential for a behavior to be defined as political.

Following Drory and Romm (1991), our definition of political behavior is “influence attempts”. This definition encompasses “explaining”, “convincing”, “manipulating”, and “selling”, as well as many other potential political strategies.

As for how the concept of politics can help us understand the behavior of CIO's, a significant body of research in the area of management of information systems can be of help.

One of the seminal papers to address this question was written by Markus (1983). In her paper, she considered a number of theories of resistance to implementation of information systems, concluding that while resistance can be a result of factors internal to the individual (such as, incompatible cognitive style, lack of motivation, etc.) or can result from factors internal to the system (such as technical deficiencies in the system or systems that are not user friendly), there is a third possibility, namely, that people resist systems because of an interaction between the two. According to Markus, this third type of theories, which include, political theories imply an interaction between the users and the system that results in some users losing power as a result of the implementation project. This last type of theories also imply that users who stand to lose power as a result of the implementation of a system will be more inclined to engage in political activities intended to stop the system from being implemented.

A similar perception of the role of politics in system implementation has been proposed by Orlikowsky (1992, p. 406) who argued that "technology is the product of human action, while it also assumes structural properties. That is, technology is constructed by actors within a given social context and through the different meanings that they attach to it and the various features they emphasize and use". This basically means that technology can be viewed as political action within its adopting context.

Given the general agreement that information technology implementation is a political process, there have some attempts to conceptualize the manner in which actors behave politically. In two publications (Romm and Pliskin, 1997a and Romm, 1999), the authors used the Drory and Romm (1991) framework as a basis for conceptualizing political behavior in virtual communities. They suggested that actors within virtual communities can act politically in a range of ways depending on two variables: the "scope of the behavior", i.e., whether the political behavior is exhibited by an individual or a group, and the "direction of the behavior", i.e., whether the political behavior is directed upward, downward, or laterally.

Using this perspective, Romm (1999) outlined nine different styles of political behavior that are associated with the implementation of information technology, particularly in the context of virtual communities. This conceptualization was applied to a range of empirical studies that explored the manifestations of political behavior in different contexts, including: industrial relations (Pliskin, Romm and Markey, 1977), gender relations (Romm and Pliskin, 1997b), group dynamics (Romm and Pliskin, 1998), group development (Pliskin and Romm, 1997), and leadership (Romm and Pliskin, 1999).

4 The Political Role of the CIO

It is our belief that even though political aspects are always part and parcel of the role of managers, particularly in the upper echelons of organizations, the role of the CIO might be more political than that of other managers. This is because one of the major goals of the information technology department is to initiate and implement new systems. This change agent role of CIO's is likely to result in an even stronger emphasis on politics than the role of other managers.

There are a number of other reasons that can heighten the political aspects of the CIO role:

- (1) In contrast to other functional areas within the organization, information technology is often perceived as a “necessary evil” – an area that, given a choice, the organization would rather not spend its resources on. This perception results in CIO’s being more defensive about their functional area than other managers and, consequently, more likely to “fight” for their unit, namely, behave politically.
- (2) When times are tough, other functional managers (i.e., marketing, production, research) consider the budget that the CIO requests for implementing new information systems, an infringement of their budget. The result is that when budgets gets stretched, the CIO is likely to become even more politically active than otherwise
- (3) Once a consensus is reached to initiate a new IT project, the CIO may find that attempts by other functional managers to stop information technology projects continue. Thus, even when a project is already in place, the political battles for the CIO do not end and are likely to proceed throughout the project life cycle.

The combined effect of the above factors is likely to result in political behavior being a central aspect of the CIO role. The goal of this research is to describe this phenomenon and explain some of the factors that shape it.

5 The Political Strategies Framework

The basis for this research is the **Political Strategies Framework** (Romm and Rippa, 2010). The framework describes the interactions that CIO’s have with other members of the organization as part of the process of introducing and maintaining systems in their organizations.

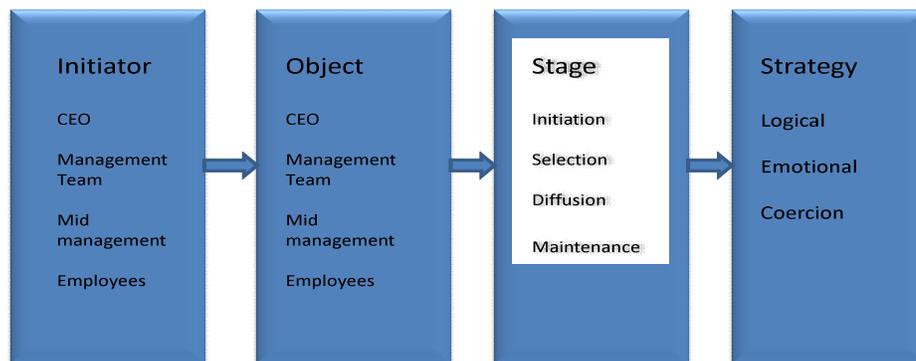


Figure 1 – The Political Strategies Framework

As indicated in Figure 1, the Political Strategies Framework is based on four constructs:

- (1) **The “initiator”** –The most likely initiators of political acts to do within the context of system implementation are members of the top management team. However, during the life cycle of the project, it is likely that organization members at all levels, starting from the President and going all the way down to the very bottom of the organizational hierarchy will engage in political acts intended to promote the goals of the project.
- (2) **The “object”** – Organization members at all levels can be the object of politicking by the initiators of information systems projects. Typical stakeholder groups that might become objects of political acts include: members of the top management team, mid managers, members of the IT unit, and employees at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy.
- (3) **The “stage”** – Information systems projects have a set of pre-determined life cycle stages that punctuate their unfolding. These stages include: (1) planning, (2) selection, (3) diffusion, and, (4) maintenance. Our framework assumes that each of these stages is associated with different political activities because the goals for each stage are different and the stake holders that need to be negotiated with by the political actors are different too.
- (4) **The “strategies”** – Our framework differentiates between three different types of political strategies, including: (1) those that are intended to appeal to the object’s **logic** (e.g., provision of additional information, provision of financial and non-financial rewards, etc.), (2) those that are intended to appeal to the object’s **emotions** (e.g., recognition, respect, friendship, cultural values, etc.), and (3) those that are intended to motivate through **Coercion** (punishments, fear, threats, etc.).

The framework assumes that political actors will **select** political strategies that fit the combined effect of the first three constructs. Thus, the specific political strategy utilized at any given situation will be the result of **who** the political actor is (the “initiator”), **who** the initiator is trying to influence (the “object”), and at what **stage** of the project life cycle the political act is taking place (“stage”).

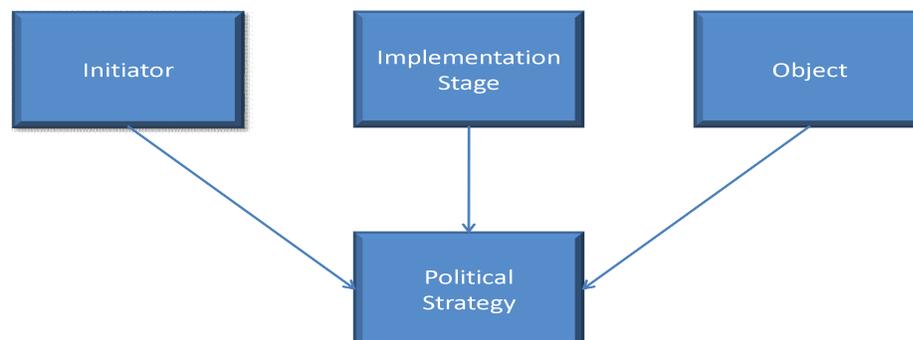


Figure 2 – The Relationship between the four constructs in the Political Strategies Framework

Figure 2 presents a pictorial depiction of the Political Strategies Framework. As the figure demonstrates, the framework assumes that aspects from each of the first three constructs will affect the political strategies that are utilized by actors.

6 Political Strategies

Based on the above assumptions, one can envisage the range of political strategies used by CIO’s as a **grid**, with one dimension depicting the stage in the life cycle of the project (initiating, selection, implementation, maintenances and evaluation) and the other depicting the “objects”, namely, the organization members that the CIO is attempting to manipulate (top management, peers, members of the IT unit, managers of others units, members of other units). The combined effect of the two dimensions interacting with each other will produce a range of political strategies that are appropriate for each political situation.

Table 1 below provides a pictorial depiction of the twenty political situations that the framework covers. Each situation is a different combination of the above two dimensions.

	Top management	Peers	Members of IT unit	Managers of other units	Members of other units
Initiating					
Selection					
Implementation					
Maintenance and modifications					

Table 1 – Political Strategies as a Function of Life Cycle “Stage” and “Objects”

7 Strategies Used by Political Actors

We stated previously that the Political Strategies Framework expects political strategies to fit one of three categories: (1) rational; (2) emotional; and (3) coercion. However, one can envisage quite a number of sub-categories within this broad categorization. The list below is of strategies that we have identified based on preliminary interviews with CIO’s and reading. It is a tentative list that could very well be modified based on the findings from the study that we outline below.

Political strategy #1 - Provision of additional Information

In the face of resistance from members of the organization, the CIO might choose to provide additional information to the member who is resisting the system (such as through formal training) as a means for making sure that the member or members support the implementation process.

Political strategy #2 - Power and recognition

Appealing to an organization member's pride, including offering opportunities for additional power within the organization and offering opportunities for the resisting member to get more respect and recognition from others, could be used when a member is resisting the implementation process because he/she believes that the new system might adversely affect the member's power within the organization.

Political strategy #3 - Financial Rewards

Listing financial considerations as a reason to undertake the system or offering financial rewards in exchange for support of the new system can be another method that the CIO is in a position to use in the face of resistance from organization members.

Political strategy #4 - Moral and cultural considerations

Appealing to an organization member moral or cultural values, which may involve using arguments like "the good of the company", "setting an example for others", "leaving a legacy for others to follow", might also be used as arguments by a CIO to help convince individuals who are not supportive of a new system to change their minds.

Political strategy #5 - Life style considerations

Offering a member of the organization who is resisting a system time away from work, better quality of life at work or other non-monitory rewards that could impact the other party's quality of life at work and out or work could be utilized by a CIO to convince organization members to support a new system.

Political strategy #6 - Threats

When all else fails, the CIO may resort to overt or covert threats. These might range from demotion, loss of income or loss of the individual's job in the company. Please note that even though CIO's are more likely to use overt threats when attempting to change the views of subordinates, covert threats, such as implying that a delay in implementing a system can result in financial cost to the company, might very well be utilized upwardly (in an attempt to convince superiors) or laterally (in an attempt to convince peers) to support a new information technology project.

8 Research Questions

The research questions for our investigation will be:

1. How does system development life cycle stage determine the type of political strategy employed by the CIO?
2. How do stake holder groups (objects) that the CIO needs to gain support from affect the political strategy utilized?
3. How does the interaction between the above variables produce the specific strategy or mix of strategies used by the CIO?

Figure 3 below shows a graphic depiction of the major variables in the Political Strategies Framework. The goal of the study will be to explore the relationships between the variables with a view to extending our understanding of the dynamics of the CIO political behavior. As our study is exploratory and qualitative, its goal would be to extend our knowledge about the phenomena rather than test the model.

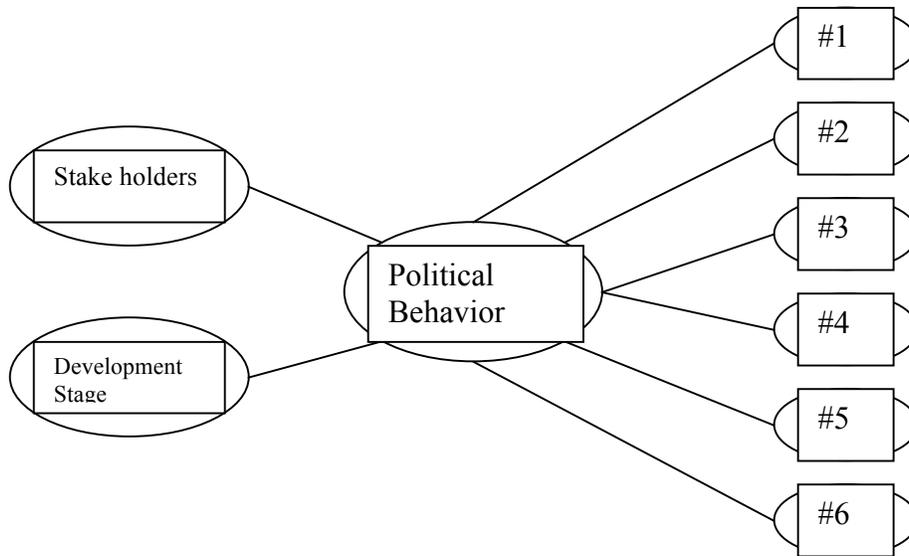


Figure 3 – Major Variables in the Political Strategies Framework

9 Empirical Research

The Political Strategies Framework can be the basis for two types of empirical research investigations. First, it can be used as the basis for a **qualitative investigation** that would involve interviewing CIO's about each of the political situations in the framework. Second, the data from the interviews (whether group or individually based) could be used as a basis for constructing a questionnaire to be administered to a larger sample of CIO's. This would enable a more rigorous

testing of the framework. The following sections explain the details of the qualitative investigation which we intend to initiate immediately.

10 Methodology

The goal of the qualitative research would be to construct a theoretical model of CIO political behavior based on qualitative data. Given that this will be a model building exercise, a small sample of CIO's (up to ten) would suffice. Following the Grounded Theory approach, the goal would be to "populate" the cells in the model by identifying as many political strategies possible. As soon as the strategies mentioned by the CIO's start to repeat, the study will be deemed complete.

The research methodology for this stage of the research will be semi-structured open ended in-depth interviews. The questions in the interview will address all the cells in the Political Strategies Framework. Please see below the list of questions for the first stage (Initiation). These same questions will repeat for the three remaining stages in the project life cycle, namely, "selection" "implementation" and "maintenances and evaluation".

"Think back of the last time that you were involved in (Initiating, Selection, Implementation, or Maintenance and Evaluation) of a system as part of your role as CIO and then answer the following questions"

Object	Details
Who	Who were the most important people that you were communicating with during this stage, particularly in terms of trying to convince them to see things your way? If there was more than one person, list them all and rank them, indicating who was the most important person or group of people that you had to get on your side at that stage.
What	What were you trying to convince them of?
How	What strategies or arguments did you use to try to get the most important stakeholder to side with you? How did they respond? Did you have to modify your strategy to gain their support?
Outcome	What was the final outcome of the process?
Lessons for the future	What was the major lesson that you took with you from this experience, particularly in terms of repeating the process in future?

Table 2 – Questions for Semi-Structured, Open-Ended Interview with CIO's

11 Expected Results from the Study

It is expected, that the results from the qualitative study will enable us to “populate” the cells in the Political Strategies Framework. In other words, the data would enable us to describe empirically (rather than conceptually), the specific strategies utilized by CIO’s during the various system development life cycle stages and vis-à-vis the various stake holders.

Future directions for research emanating from the above could include:

1. Converting the questions in the interview below into a formal questionnaire and possibly adding to them questions that are not there at this time
2. Administering the questionnaire to a sample of CIO’s in the US
1. Comparing the results from the US sample to samples of CIO’s in other countries.

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