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Gerald R. Ferris, Donald B. Fedor, J.Gregory Chachere and Louis R. Pondy

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Myths and Politics in Organizational Contexts

GERALD R. FERRIS

Texas A&M University

DONALD B. FEDOR

Georgia Institute of Technology

J. GREGORY CHACHERE

Northeast Louisiana University

LOUIS R. PONDY

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Myth systems and politics help to establish the internal context of organizational settings, and thus are quite important processes contributing to more meaningful interpretations of events and phenomena in organizations. Both processes have been studied, albeit, independently. In the present article, the argument is made that the integration of these two processes provides a potentially richer understanding of the dynamic processes of intraorganizational contexts, which is critical to effective organizational change. Examples are used to illustrate specific points and suggestions for research and practice are proposed.

From decades of research in the organizational sciences, we have developed an appreciation for the vast complexities of organizational life. Simple, rational approaches to behavior and models of organizational processes have tended not to capture these complexities adequately, and thus have not contributed to the kind of informed understanding we seek concerning why people and

Louis R. Pondy died of cancer on July 16, 1987. Without a doubt, his many intellectual contributions to the organizational sciences will long be remembered. We would simply like to acknowledge a valued friend and colleague by dedicating this article to him. Correspondence concerning the article should be addressed to Gerald R. Ferris, Department of Management, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas 77843.

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organizations do what they do. Whereas dispositional approaches have furthered this understanding somewhat, there has been a general movement across areas within the organizational sciences to focus efforts at examining the context or environment within which events and phenomena materialize. The investigation of intraorganizational contexts has generated its own set of complexities and a realization that these settings are typically multifaceted and dynamic in nature. Myth systems and politics help to establish the internal context of organizational settings, and thus are quite important processes, contributing to more meaningful interpretations of events and phenomena in organizations. The present article provides an analysis and integration of these two processes, and demonstrates how such an integration can contribute to a richer understanding of the dynamic processes of intraorganizational contexts.

INTRAORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXTS

Obviously, many factors contribute to developing the internal context and character of the organization. Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) noted that the organizational context is at least in part the outcome of employee actions, and they suggest one image of a manager as "an active manipulator of constraints and of the social setting in which the organization is embedded" (pp. 18-19). Frost (1987) claimed that the existing context of an organization is the manifestation of the outcomes of "contests" or political games played out in its history. Peters (1978) argued that management systems could be construed as vehicles for transmitting the organization's language, and thus helped shape the organization's character. One might extend Peters's argument by claiming that just as management systems help to shape the organization's character, such systems are also shaped by it. The research on organizational culture has contributed greatly to our understanding of organizational contexts or environments (e.g., Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Smircich, 1983) and has suggested ways that the character or culture of the organization is communicated. Tichy (1983) has suggested that culture is communicated through various mechanisms, including ceremonies, stories, and symbols, but that one of the most effective means for transmitting culture-related information is through the organization's human resources system. Of the many sets of activities that make up this system, it might reasonably be argued that the performance evaluation and reward processes

perhaps represent the most critical set. Furthermore, it seems likely that such processes would be associated with, if not the focal point of, sources of rich information concerning myths, politics, and culture that could be brought to bear on developing a more informed understanding of the dynamic nature of contexts in the organization.

The context of organizations clearly is important not only because it contributes to more meaningful interpretations of behavior, practices, and policies that emerge within those contexts, but because an informed understanding of the contextual dynamics is a necessary condition for the effective implementation of organizational change. As noted, the research on organizational culture is well underway in making contributions to this understanding. Considerably less well developed and researched areas, yet potentially quite important contributors to contextual formation, are myths and politics. Both areas have been studied, albeit independently. Previous research has failed to develop their complementary natures, although Owen (1986) has made efforts in this direction. He made reference to the dynamics of culture and the importance of myth as a primary tool that related the story of how things operate. One might extend Owen's notions to suggest that the way things operate, in many cases, could reflect the political nature of contexts. In the present article, a more careful examination is made of these two areas and an integration is provided through which a potentially richer understanding of organizational contextual dynamics is realized. Examples are used to illustrate specific points concerning the integration of myths and politics.

MYTHS

One of the principal issues addressed as focal in the successful development and implementation of organizational interventions is the context for newly acquired behaviors, beliefs, or attitudes. Boje, Fedor, and Rowland (1982) have discussed this context in terms of the organizational myth system. They defined a myth system as a structure of beliefs in the organization that serves as the "taken-for-granted" logic base for the relevant organizational unit. Myths are used herein to designate a network of interlocking and mutually supportive beliefs. The label of myth is used to connote the way organizational activities are understood and explained. When needed, the beliefs that constitute the myth are related in a

storylike fashion, relating to the specific issue at hand. These myths are not held to be falsehoods or ungrounded beliefs, but rather frameworks that organizational members use to invest meaning and subsequent validity to activities occurring in the workplace. Both Boje et al. and Owen (1986) have argued that the procedures that differentiate the ways things are done presumably would be grounded in the organization's myth structure.

Myths might be considered a manifestation of the larger concept of organizational culture. Myths are actually how culture gets verbalized and explained, and, according to others, stories about "how things are around here" (Owen, 1986, p. 116). Culture has been defined as the social or normative glue that holds organizations together (Tichy, 1982), or the way that organizational members come to interpret and understand the phenomena they encounter, the values, beliefs and philosophies that participants share (Louis, 1980). In many ways, culture can best be described as an organization's unique personality, established over time by its patterns of reactions and responses to challenges and opportunities (Ulrich, 1984). In addition to providing a framework to enhance understanding, culture guides the future behavior of organizational members (Louis, 1980; Meyer, 1981; Pfeffer, 1981).

The critically important role that it plays in organizational stability makes culture a double-edged sword. While culture, manifested through symbolic devices such as myths, provides understanding, shared interpretations, and normative behavioral guidance for organizational members, the outcomes of these processes also limit what is interpreted as "appropriate" in the organization. Culture and myth systems can actually serve as sources of resistance and impede the progress of a systemwide change. While strong company cultures help to motivate and direct members' activities in the attainment of company goals, they may also resist management efforts when newly formed goals or strategies do not "fit" the existing culture (Ulrich, 1984; Wilkins, 1984). Furthermore, it may not be simply a matter of fit. The goals and strategies manifested in interventions may actually challenge the existing culture. When the culture and myth system are congruent with organizational goals and directions, they facilitate operations and success. However, when they are incongruent, they impede and impair progress, at least in the direction of the planned change, by serving as a source of resistance to the change. These factors illustrate the important role that culture and myth systems

play in organizations, and the necessity of understanding organizational culture for success in implementing interventions and systemwide changes (Ulrich, 1984; Wilkins, 1984).

An issue that is relevant to the myth analysis is the current stage of the myths that are likely to be altered or modified. It has been proposed that myths proceed through life stages (see Boje et al., 1982, for a more detailed discussion). A myth emerges to explain organizational occurrences in the midst of ambiguity or uncertainty. Over time, the myth becomes an accepted way to explain specific cause-and-effect relationships and, in this way, successfully manages a portion of the organization's uncertainty. While organizational members come to accept the myth's handling of the uncertainty, inconsistent data typically will meet with resistance or dismissal. However, in the later stages of the myth's life cycle, the myth will be questioned by at least some of the organization members due to the persistence of anomalies. It is during these stages that an intervention, which challenges the myth in question, will have the greatest chance for success. The process of myth analysis becomes further complicated by the relative power and political activities of the groups supporting different myths.

POLITICS

Personal experience, hunches, and anecdotal evidence for years have supported a general belief that behavior in and of organizations is often political in nature. More recently, some conceptual and empirical research has added further support to these notions. Unfortunately, systematic inquiry in this area had been sparse and limited, leaving largely unexplored the potential antecedents and consequences of organizational politics.

It is quite possible that the current state of research on organizational politics is at least partially a function of fragmentation in the delineation of the construct. Organizational scientists have had different notions of what constitutes political behavior. Some have defined organizational politics in terms of the behavior of interest groups to use power to influence decision making (e.g., Pettigrew, 1973; Tushman, 1977). Others have focused on the self-serving and organizationally nonsanctioned nature of individual behavior in organization (e.g., Burns, 1961; Gandz & Murray, 1980; Mayes & Allen, 1977; Porter, 1976; Schein, 1977b). Still others have characterized organizational politics as a social influence process with potentially functional or dysfunctional organizational conse-

quences (Allen, Madison, Porter, Renwick, & Mayes, 1979), or simply the management of influence (Madison, Allen, Porter, Renwick, & Mayes, 1980). Perhaps this fragmentation and differing perspectives have prompted some scholars to state recently, "The meaning of organizational politics remains largely unknown, in spite of the importance of political behavior to organizational functioning" (Vrendenburgh & Maurer, 1984, p. 47).

For some time now, we have been working at designing a program of research that attempts to address both conceptual and empirical limitations of prior work on organizational politics, while also providing a mechanism for integrating several streams of research that seem to be addressing essentially the same phenomenon (see Ferris, Russ, & Fandt, *in press*, for a review). Certainly an important part of this effort has been an attempt to clarify the meaning of the construct without establishing the constraints of an overly rigid definition. The present working notions concerning organizational politics characterizes it as a social influence process in which opportunistic behavior (demonstrated by individuals, groups, or organizations) is engaged in for purposes of self-interest maximization. In a recent conceptualization of social influence, Ferris and Mitchell (1987) discussed the role of politics and some of the factors that might encourage such activity.

With the foregoing notions in mind, we would suggest that systematic inquiry needs to proceed in three directions to converge on a more informed understanding of organizational politics. First, efforts are needed to better understand the conditions under which politics is demonstrated as well as the particular types of behaviors selected in particular situations. Second, research should focus on the consequences of engaging in political behavior, and the extent to which the goals or outcomes desired are actually attained. Third, efforts should be focused on examining the potential behavioral and attitudinal consequences of perceiving the work environment or context as political in nature.

Some research has been conducted with respect to the first area, reporting that social influence and political behavior are more likely to be observed as uncertainty in the situation increases (Fandt & Ferris, *in press*; Pfeffer, Salancik, & Leblebici, 1976). If task and situation outcomes are ambiguous, or subjectively determined, there is more opportunity for politics to exercise influence. Riley (1983) noted the effects of uncertainty in her discussion of political cultures by stating, "the more grey, the more politics" (p. 429).

Furthermore, some research has suggested that task situations can be structured so as to encourage political behavior of subordinates toward their supervisors (Ferris & Porac, 1984).

The second direction of suggested research endeavor has also produced some results that have increased understanding of the instrumental nature of political behavior, or its consequences for attaining desired outcomes (e.g., Ferris et al., in press; Wood & Mitchell, 1981). Clearly, more research is needed in both the first and the second areas mentioned, but the third area is perhaps most in need of attention. Systematic effort only recently has been devoted to examining either how perceptions of organizational politics are formed or the potential effects that such perceptions have on work attitudes and behavior (Ferris & Kacmar, 1988; Gandz & Murray, 1980). It is this third area that bears most directly on the inherent contextual dynamics of the organization.

Some work has been done on politics and organizational development efforts, at least acknowledging the importance of political issues in organizational interventions. However, most of this research has focused on the particular resources and strategies consultants might use to increase their power within the change effort (e.g., Bateman, 1980; Pettigrew, 1975; Schein, 1977a). More directly related to an examination of the potential political dynamics of the focal organizational context in a change effort, Cobb (1986) took a dispositional analytical approach to political diagnosis in organizational development, seeking to identify, for example, individuals who possessed the most power and their orientation to its use. While he did not go further into a more comprehensive analysis of the context, he acknowledged that a pressing issue for future research was a diagnosis of the political dynamics of the client organization (i.e., the context) in organizational change and development efforts.

THE EMERGENCE AND PERPETUATION OF POLITICAL CONTEXTS: AN INTEGRATION OF MYTHS AND POLITICS

The independent examination of myths and politics suggests several conclusions. One is that each area appears to have much to contribute to a more informed understanding of the dynamics of organizational contexts. Another is that considerable additional research is needed in each area because, while they "suggest" interesting implications, much remains to be done before more

definitive statements can be made. Yet another conclusion we would advance is that an integration of these two areas might lead to more rapid advances in contributions to the understanding of organizational contexts (and the development of political contexts) than research pursuits in each area independently.

An integration of myths and politics seems to be a quite natural one. Myths and politics occur under similar conditions, both seemingly driven by ambiguity or uncertainty in the environment (e.g., Boje et al., 1982; Fandt & Ferris, *in press*; Ferris, Russ, & Fandt, *in press*). Both processes attempt to bring structure, meaning, and interpretation to these ambiguous or uncertain conditions. These processes are particularly difficult to grasp conceptually and empirically because they can be both the cause and the consequence of ambiguity.

There appears to be natural overlap between myths and politics. The content of many myths is often political in nature and myths are used to define the meaning of current political activities (Tichy, 1983). Furthermore, the emergence of politics often creates new and different myths. While these two phenomena are, to some extent, mutually dependent (i.e., interlocking), they might also be sources of considerable conflict. Events in the organization's internal or external environment might differentially affect one of these systems, such as when environmental changes precipitate political activities not sanctioned by existing myths. Thus at present, while it seems clear that myths and politics are related elements of the context, unidirectional causation (i.e., one causing the other) seems less reflective of reality than reciprocal causation. The two processes appear to be intricately intertwined, which further supports the examination of their integrated contribution to better understanding the dynamics of contexts.

Cobb (1986) has suggested that myths represent important sources of political information in organizations, and that useful ways to identify myths and politics might be through both language and symbolism (e.g., Pondy, Frost, Morgan, & Dandridge, 1983). Furthermore, Tichy (1983) argued that the strategic management of change involves linking the political and cultural systems of the organizational context or environment to the technical system, which is carried out principally through the management of symbols, myths, and language (Pfeffer, 1981; Pondy, 1978; Weick, 1979). Tichy also contended that myths represent a frequently used mechanism for communicating cultural and contextual information, and that myths very often consist of quite political content.

Ambiguity or uncertainty in the environment was already mentioned as creating conditions that promote myths and politics (Riley, 1983). However, one might argue that uncertainty can be further differentiated. Tichy (1983) has highlighted the importance of political uncertainty, which he defines as "the degree of stability and predictability with regard to the bargaining and exchange relationships among interest groups over the allocation of resources, power, prestige, etc." (p. 231). He raised as a key concern the fact that political uncertainty must be minimized or managed in order for change to be effective. However, it seems that an initial task is to observe, investigate, and try to understand its dynamics.

An interesting attempt at studying myths and politics was conducted by Riley (1983) in her investigation of political cultures. She examined political symbols in two different firms in an effort to identify the structures governing the nature of politics in organizational contexts and cultures. In this investigation, she used myths as an important tool for conducting part of the institutional analysis concerning political image, reflecting once again the important integration of myths and politics.

Implicit in the foregoing discussion is the emergence of contexts, and more specifically, of political contexts. However, the research and practical implications of political contexts need to be addressed more directly. The notion that organizational contexts or environments can be political has been supported by research examining the political nature of cultures (Riley, 1983; Von Glinow, 1985). What we need to know is how politics becomes interwoven into the very fabric or context of organizations and is perpetuated. Thus it might be worth pursuing in more detail the processes that help to explain the political nature of some work environments and the relatively apolitical nature of others, particularly because we see the myth system playing a key role.

It is important to examine more closely the potential antecedents of political contexts, or how such environments emerge. We propose that personnel selection and socialization account for much of the differences in the creation of political environments. Furthermore, over time the behaviors that contribute the political context get reinforced, institutionalized, and thus firmly embedded in the organization's internal context. And the primary vehicle for transmission of information serving as explanations and sense-making mechanisms for these behavioral dynamics is the myth system.

Schneider (1987) argued recently that "the people make the place," suggesting that the personalities, value systems, behaviors, and so forth of incumbent employees in organizations shape the psychological environment. We agree and believe this has some interesting implications for political environments. For one thing, managers like to select people in their own image (Beer, Spector, Lawrence, Mills, & Walton, 1984), possibly for power-enhancing and political reasons. To the extent that those managers having input into the selection process are politically inclined, they may perpetuate and even add to the political environment by selecting people that think and behave like they do. Clearly, research is needed to investigate these notions, but the implications appear to be quite extensive in several respects. To the extent that managers attempt to use the selection system opportunistically to enhance their own power bases, the inputs as well as the outcomes of these struggles bear closer examination. For example, as noted by Beer et al., the choice of which managers are allowed input into personnel selection decisions will affect the types of people brought in, and thus the organizational context. So, we could propose that political activity and positioning emerges in such situations, with certain managers potentially lobbying for input so they can influence the process.

However, this seems to be only one implication. We also need to examine additional dynamics of the process concerning the respective positions of different managers arguing for different candidates, and the behavior of those managers toward the "winner" or candidate who is actually hired. We might suggest that if two managers have input into a selection decision, one strongly supporting the candidate in question and the other not supporting a hire decision, the respective behavior of those two managers (who will work with this new hire) toward this new employee would be quite different. Schoorman (1988) recently examined this notion, using an "escalation of commitment" perspective. He found that supervisors who participated in the hiring process and agreed with the decision positively biased subsequent performance evaluations of that person, whereas supervisors who participated in the process but disagreed with the decision issued negatively biased performance evaluations for that person. We would suggest that it is as reasonable to interpret these findings using a political perspective. That is, that managers engage in behaviors that maximize their own self-interests; in this case, if a manager didn't

agree with the selection decision, he or she might use the performance appraisal system to his or her political advantage (Longenecker, Sims, & Gioia, 1987) by giving low ratings. Such an action might be motivated by an interest in providing documented evidence that the organization hired the wrong person. Taken to an extreme (i.e., how this might play out over time, assuming the manager repeatedly gives low evaluations), this might be a strategy to engineer the termination of this employee, and thus initiate the political selection game once again.

A practical implication of this process, subject to empirical verification, is the degree of control the organization should exercise over the personnel selection process, and even which managers are allowed input into the decision. This discussion of the use of the selection system in a political manner is one aspect of managerial political behavior. We have seen recently that another way managers can behave politically is through their use of the performance appraisal system (Longenecker et al., 1987). We would suggest that there are numerous ways that managers can behave politically, either by capitalizing on an existing opportunity or by creating their own. For example, we would argue that feedback and communication behavior directed toward superiors and subordinates is frequently merely symbolic in nature, designed not to effect change in behavior, but rather to manage the impressions of relevant others that the communicator is doing his or her job well. Obviously such notions require much greater development, but they raise our awareness of the need for an informed understanding of managerial political behavior and its role in the creation and maintenance of organizational contexts. We believe the need for such work has never been greater, particularly in light of suggestions that perhaps our organizational reward systems might actually reinforce employees for behaving unethically and politically (Janson & Von Glinow, 1985). Furthermore, Hirsch (1987) recently suggested that many organizations today seem to demonstrate a lack of commitment to their people by taking actions with little regard to their employees (e.g., terminations, layoffs, etc.). Thus he coined the term the *free-agent manager* to depict the type of self-interest-maximizing individual who is being created out of these circumstances. Thus we might conclude that one reason that political contexts are maintained is because organizations reinforce political behavior. Before we can change the nature of such a process, we need to understand it better.

In addition to reinforcing political behavior, organizations might also “teach” political behavior, thus helping to further account for the development and maintenance of political contexts. The mechanism of organizational socialization can have a strong influence on the creation of politics in a couple of ways. One way is through social learning of political behavior. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) has demonstrated that learning often takes place through the modeling or imitation of behavior demonstrated by others. In fact, the social learning of supervisory style has been demonstrated in research (Weiss, 1977), as has the social learning of work values (Weiss, 1978). In light of this work, it seems quite reasonable that employees could learn to behave politically by working with supervisors and coworkers who demonstrate political behavior (particularly if they are successful in their efforts, reinforced, not punished, etc.). In addition to the employee observing the extent to which others’ political behavior is successful, key considerations in the stimulation or promotion of political behavior concern how and by whom employees are socialized in the organization. Much of the socialization process deals with the informal aspects of how one “learns the ropes,” and perhaps what the content of the socialization experience entails. Research on the mentoring process might shed light on the way employees “learn the ropes” from more senior sponsors, and the different motivations that underlie this process. Kram (1985) suggested that both protégé and mentor have goals in this process. Protégés seek to gain exposure, upward mobility, and so forth, while mentors seek to gain respect by developing young talent, but also to contribute to their power or influence base by fostering protégé commitment and support for the mentors’ interests.

We would suggest that much information that is transmitted focuses on how things get done around the organization, which might be passed on in the form of organization stories or through myths that have been built up over the years, all of which can have strong political currents. Frost (1987) suggested that political activity becomes embedded in the context over time, and so really to understand it well we need to take a sociohistorical approach to analyzing the conflicts, power plays, and political games that have taken place. Such historical accounts result in interpretations and misinterpretations that are carried and passed on through organizational myths and stories.

Thus it seems that an integration of myths and politics could prove particularly fruitful in developing a more informed understanding of organizational contexts. This discussion examined how an integration of myths and politics might be useful in addressing how contexts take on particular orientations or values (e.g., political), and how such contexts are perpetuated over time. In the next section, we will examine examples of myths and politics in action, drawn from a large-scale organizational intervention that we conducted.

The objective of this section was not only to reiterate the significance of both myths and politics, but, more importantly, to propose that an integration of these two areas would prove more fruitful in attempts to develop a more informed understanding of organizational contexts than from viewing the areas independently. As demonstrated below, myths and politics can be difficult to separate.

MYTHS AND POLITICS: SOME EXAMPLES

The examples discussed herein are drawn from an intervention involving three of the authors. The intervention involved the implementation of a new performance appraisal system in a division of a large multinational conglomerate. This division manufactures components for the automobile industry. Many of the examples that follow emerged as the intervention progressed. These examples are offered to illustrate the interplay of myths and politics and to demonstrate their interdependence. Owen (1986) recently reported on an examination made of an organization's context and culture, in a similar fashion, through an identification and analysis of operative myths. As organizational diagnosis and change take place, myths and political activities are often encountered. Moreover, the political behaviors are found to be inexorably tied to those myths. This can be especially true when a diagnosis or change involves human resource systems that will affect how employees are to be rewarded and managed. Longenecker et al. (1987) found from managerial interviews an open recognition that the performance appraisal process can be quite political. Riley (1983) reported similar findings in her study of two organizations. When promotions are on the line, the process takes on a very political flavor. This is especially true in less structured (i.e., more uncertain) situations. In the highly uncertain and ambiguous

environments of scientists and engineers working in research and development units in high-technology firms, Ferris, Buckley, Yee, and West (1988) found politics to play a considerable role in performance evaluation systems, particularly with respect to promotions. The Longenecker et al. results also indicated that myths about the "real" purposes of the appraisal process are evident in such politically oriented systems. As was found during the intervention from which the following examples are drawn, much of what occurred had little to do with the pure accuracy of the appraisal (Kennedy, 1980).

(1) *Attitudes cause behavior.* For many people, it is a fundamental assumption that attitudes are the sole driving force behind behavior. During an intervention, we constantly heard the hourly employees being described by their "attitudes." In this particular organizational culture, such attitude assessments were summaries of the individual as a worker. What seemed incredulous to these organizational members was that any PA system could deal with behavior while apparently ignoring its underlying causes.

The PA system being created in this organization directly conflicted with this myth. In order to fulfill the feedback objectives of the system, the workers' performances had to be analyzed on five specific criteria that were considered relatively independent, nonattitudinal dimensions. The other objective was to get supervisors to change the way they approached subordinate performance. Essentially, the objective was to move them away from global assessments and, instead, to deal with subordinate performance in specific outcome and behavioral terms.

The supervisors responded in a number of ways, including attacking the logic of the system and its viability in their organization. The "logic" supporting the myth was used as a key foil in the supervisors' political behavior.

(2) *Subordinates as poor self-raters.* One of the predetermined design aspects of the new PA system was that both the rater and the ratee would fill out the PA instrument. Any resulting differences were to be used as a basis for discussion during the PA sessions. The supervisors provided considerable anecdotal evidence to substantiate the myth that subordinates would be significantly less accurate raters than their supervisors. Largely, this myth focused on (a) subordinates having overly inflated self-images and, therefore, manipulating the PA system to serve their own purposes; (b) some

subordinates underrating themselves in order to be consistent with their supervisors (wherein the subordinates would use the PA system to curry their supervisor's favor); and (c) the belief that a good portion of the work force might refuse to cooperate, even to the point of refusing to sign the final form, much less fill out their own version. This expectation was being generalized from the difficulties encountered when grievances were submitted against the employee to the personnel office.

Obviously, one main issue of this myth was a lack of trust between supervisors and line employees. Again, the supervisors attempted to use "expertise," influence, and politics to challenge the validity of this system, which was antithetical to their way of viewing subordinate responses.

(3) *Positive reinforcement as a detriment.* The PA system was being instituted without a concurrent (and arguably necessary) change in the compensation system. Instead, the PA system's efficacy was supposed to depend upon the feedback effect (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979), the potential to set goals (Locke, 1968), and the positive reinforcement that immediate supervisors could provide (Luthans & Kreitner, 1975). The myth that emerged to challenge at least a part of this objective concerned positive feedback as a detriment to future performance. As Kennedy (1980) had noted, supervisors often believe that positive feedback is unnecessary simply because subordinates are paid to perform well. For this particular group of supervisors, telling subordinates they were performing well would result in a drop-off in performance. Myths based on such logic are difficult to displace and political activity used to protect the myth is perceived as perfectly reasonable by those espousing it.

(4) *Merit pay leads to unionization.* As alluded to in myth 3, management was instituting a performance-based appraisal system without considering any changes in the way employees were paid for their job performance. Management had a well-entrenched myth concerning merit pay. The beliefs supporting this traditional policy included anecdotal evidence about other companies abandoning their merit pay programs, the fear that union organizers would use it against the company by appealing to the poor performers, and the impossibilities of administering such a program equitably. This myth allowed management and the human resource staff to maintain their existing orientations toward both the

employees and the nature of the work being performed.

(5) *PA as an accurate reflection of performance.* While the supervisors were well aware of the difficulties and ramifications of rating subordinate performance, upper management was convinced that appraisals could and should be an accurate reflection of subordinate performance. Management's myth allowed it to take a firm and relatively unsympathetic stance toward the struggles faced by their supervisors grappling with this new system. As a result, management saw no reason to change its own activities to compensate for any of the difficulties being encountered by the supervisors. In the foreseeable future, management had the power to force its own myth on the supervisors. The myth provided the support (at least as perceived by management) to behave politically, to punish those who might try to challenge its position on this matter.

These five examples were extracted from a situation in which the organizational members were facing significant uncertainty in terms of a new management system and the roles of its supervisors and subordinates. Consistent with previous research, a great deal of political activity took place and the myths were being used as shields to protect their respective constituencies. Overall, two important points can be drawn from these examples:

- (1) Organizational members often invoke multiple myths politically in order either to resist change by attempting to demonstrate its unfeasibility or to co-opt the change to better fit their view of organizational reality.
- (2) Organizational interventions or changes can touch different "depths" within the organization. These depths relate to the different levels of importance of the myths that interact with the change. Thus change involving a PA system can affect an entire range of organizational systems and outcomes. The more basic the issue to the members, the more deeply entrenched the myth, the more likely political activity will ensue to challenge proposed changes and, as a result, the more difficult will be the change effort.

DISCUSSION

The analysis presented in this article suggests the importance of examining and understanding myths and politics in organizational contexts, but also their integration and how the two processes can

become intricately intertwined in forming the context of organizational life. The examples cited, which illustrate the integration of myths and politics, were primarily selected from the area of human resources systems—performance appraisal and reward processes in particular. Human resources systems were noted by Tichy (1983) as being particularly important and useful vehicles for communicating cultural information. Furthermore, Kilmann (1984) highlighted the significance of attending to the performance evaluation and reward system when undertaking organizational change efforts.

Empirical research in this area needs to utilize methodologies that permit a thorough and systematic investigation of the myths-politics processes, and how such processes contribute to the dynamics of organizational contexts. Interested researchers should take note of Riley's (1983) work, which examined myths and politics in the investigation of political cultures. Her sound use of some qualitative research techniques led to a rich analysis and understanding of two quite different environments. Future research might examine the extent to which long-standing and unchallenged myths are responsible for the existence and perpetuation of highly political environments. There is much to be done in this area.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

There seem to be some potentially important implications for practice, as well, from the present analysis. A systematic and thorough analysis of the potential change or intervention context is absolutely critical. New organizational systems cannot simply be installed. There must be some correspondence between the organizational context and the change being considered. Pondy (1983) has discussed the importance of myths in the facilitation of organizational change. Recent work by Cobb (1986) has acknowledged the importance of these issues of politics and myths in diagnosis for organizational development. In fact, as comprehensive of an analysis as possible concerning the contextual dynamics of the focal organization, including myths, politics, symbolism, and culture, should only increase the probability that organizational interventions will be implemented effectively.

While it is relatively easy to prescribe such a thoroughness, the execution of such in-depth diagnosis is difficult to achieve. First, it may not be obvious how systemic a proposed change is and, therefore, what myths will be challenged in the process. For example, changing a reporting form for a warehouse operation may

seem like a very trivial issue. However, if the additional information requested on the form alters the power bases of the supervisors, such that stock location is no longer proprietary information, the reaction from those affected will be much more violent than anticipated. The initiators of the change will be somewhat baffled by the political behaviors that are evoked, even to the point of attacking them as childish and inappropriate. In other words, changes that appear minor on the surface may affect beliefs about power or resources that are not apparent from a more "objective" perspective.

Second, such changes are not unidimensional, and any intervention will go through a number of significant alterations and adaptations in the process of being implemented. At each stage, it will take on new aspects and touch additional beliefs and systems in the organization. What this calls for is the continued involvement of key members as well as the building in of slack and flexibility.

Third, there are no clear-cut steps as to how the assessment of political and myth systems should be carried out. However, what can be offered are some suggestions when new organizational systems are being considered. Preintervention discussions with key members are extremely important. Getting their reactions about the change and how they see others responding will provide valuable information concerning what myths are likely to be evoked, and the political behaviors that will be enacted in response to the change.

Changes that may challenge key beliefs (i.e., those close to the organization's or its members' identities) will be difficult to implement successfully. Often such cases will necessitate significant work directed at such beliefs before the intervention is even attempted. A growing body of research and theory has begun to address the process of changing organizational culture (Kilmann & Covin, 1988) and should be consulted when reactions to the change suggest that it will be systemic.

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Gerald R. Ferris is Associate Professor of Management at Texas A&M University. He received a Ph.D. in business administration from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His research interests include performance appraisal, social influence processes, and political behavior in organizations.

Donald B. Fedor is Assistant Professor of Management at Georgia Institute of Technology. He received a Ph.D. in business administration from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His research interests are in the areas of feedback and performance appraisal.

J. Gregory Chachere is Assistant Professor of Management at Northeast Louisiana University. He received a Ph.D. in management at Texas A&M University. He holds a B.A. degree in Communications and an M.B.A. from Northeast Louisiana University. He has research interests in the performance appraisal process.

The late Louis R. Pondy was Professor of Business Administration at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He received a Ph.D. from the Graduate School of Industrial Administration at Carnegie-Mellon University. His research interests spanned across a number of areas in organization theory, including conflict and symbolism.