Corrosive Political Climates: The Heavy Toll of Negative Political Behavior in Organizations

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Five middle managers in five different settings put into words what most employees feel when they find themselves exposed to episodes of negative political behavior in their work organizations:

"I was astonished, appalled, angry, shocked!" (team member, small publishing company)

"The tension. I feel it." (staff member, mid-size information technology subcontractor)

"We're still trying to make sense of it. We felt bad as a group." (team leader, Fortune 500 high-technology company)

"You have to be on guard all of the time. You can't trust anyone in this place. (team leader, Fortune 500 high technology company)

"Remember I told you that nothing shocks me anymore? Well, this shocked me." (manager, national headquarters of a large non-profit organization)

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Corrosive political climates in organizations are marked by frequent episodes of negative political behavior. Negative political behavior describes the actions taken by individuals that result in hurtful outcomes for organizational members, and for the organization more broadly. Negative political behaviors are a subset of what researchers have called political behavior—those that are “informal, ostensibly parochial, typically divisive, and above all, in a technical sense, illegitimate—sanctioned neither by informal authority, accepted ideology nor certified expertise” (Mintzberg 1983, 172). Political behaviors are marked by an actor’s attempt to conceal the motive for the behavior, implicitly aware of its unacceptability (Pfeffer 1981). Negative political behaviors take many forms including showing favoritism in promotions, purposefully withholding information, feigning attitudes in an opportunistic fashion, taking credit for other people’s work (Ferris and King 1991), or taking actions that put personal power ahead of organizational good. Negative political behaviors often involve conflicts that produce outcomes that are detrimental to other individuals or groups (Drory and Romm 1990). The self-serving motives of the members engaging in negative political behaviors result in outcomes that hurt the organization.

Evidence shows that negative political behaviors inflicted on individuals and the corrosive political climates that create and sustain them are harmful. The expressed shock, confusion, and tension reveal the negative emotional toll levied on individuals who endure in these kinds of contexts. Individuals’ attachments to organizations weaken. Uncertainty and ambiguity flourish. A sense of personal vulnerability, hurt, and a weakened sense of control may ensue. These individual reactions contribute to group and organizational-level consequences. Research suggests that individuals become less focused on organizational goals (Madison et al. 1980), the flow of information becomes restricted and decision speed slows (Eisenhardt and Bourgeois 1988), excitement about innovation dampens (Parker, Dipboye, and Jackson 1995), members withdraw psychologically and physically (e.g., Cropanzano et al. 1997; Ferris et al. 1996), employee stress increases (Cropanzano et al. 1997; Ferris et al. 1996), critical employee attitudes such as job involvement and satisfaction decline (Cropanzano et al. 1997; Gans and Murray 1980), and valuable employees exit the organization (Pfeffer 1992). Clearly, the frequency and extensiveness of negative political behavior can harm an organization’s capacity to remain coherent and effective. Mintzberg (1991) describes the consequences quite graphically: “At the limit, the organization dominated
by politics goes out of control by exploding. Nothing remains at the
core—no central direction, no integrating ideology, and therefore, no
directed effort at efficiency or proficiency of innovation” (p. 65).

This chapter builds a research agenda around the issue of negative
political behavior and the corrosive political environments in which it
flourishes. To do so, we begin with a discussion of why this problem is
now so compelling for research and practice. Building on this call for
understanding, we turn to the organizational literature to consider com-
mon assumptions and conditions that contribute to negative political
behavior. We identify a significant gap in current research and propose a
model that focuses on the critical relationship between negative political
behaviors and issues of trust. The following sections provide a foundation
to consider the practical issues of managing negative political behaviors
and to describe an ambitious agenda for future research that is useful for
practitioners and organizational scholars alike.

Getting Serious about the Downsides of
Negative Political Behavior

Negative political behaviors are ubiquitous in organizational life. How-
ever, the consequences of these behaviors are amplified in fast-paced,
globally competitive environments in which work is increasingly more
interdependent within and across organizational boundaries. Three argu-
ments compel practitioners and scholars to become serious about actively
managing the occurrence of negative political behaviors in organizations:
dynamic capabilities, collaborative potential, and changing employee con-
tracts.

The competitive conditions facing organizations are increasingly dy-
namic: “There is rapid change in technology and market forces, and ‘feed-
back’ effects on firms” (Teece, Pisano, and Shuen 1997, 512). Under
these competitive conditions, an organization’s capacity to build and sus-
tain dynamic capabilities is key. In today’s world, the organization must
be capable of “adapting, integrating, and reconfiguring internal and exter-
nal organizational skills, resources, and functional competencies to match
the requirements of changing environment” (Teece, Pisano, and Shuen
1997, 515). This achievement rests critically on “business processes’ mar-
ket positions, and expansion paths” (Teece, Pisano, and Shuen 1997, 515)
that are enabled and sustained by the behaviors and commitments of employees. It is the behaviors and commitments of employees that compose the "organizational structures and managerial processes which support productive activity" (Teece, Pisano, and Shuen 1997, 517).

Trust is critical to these processes. Interpersonal trust permits flexibility in responding to dynamic conditions. It allows for greater interdependence, promotes the free flow of information (Powell and Smith-Doerr 1994), and enhances constructive interpersonal contributions (McAllister 1995). Likewise, employees' trust in their organization increases commitment, job involvement, and civic contributions (Robinson 1996). Our basic argument is that corrosive political environments undermine trust, curting away at an organization's dynamic capabilities, weakening its basis for competitive survival.

In particular, an organization's capability for collaboration both within and across its boundaries relies on the development of reliable routines and the creation and maintenance of trust. Trust is particularly important because companies are moving toward less hierarchical forms of governance. Less hierarchy leaves individuals and organizations more dependent on others over whom they have no legitimate authority (Pfeffer 1992). Trust facilitates collaboration among peers because it reduces the need to monitor others' behavior, formalize procedures, and create completely specified contracts (Macauley 1963; Williamson 1975). Trust building is valuable to any organization that depends on long-term nonhierarchical relationships (Powell 1990).

For example, a network company's competitive advantage in terms of flexibility, access to tacit knowledge, and richer-free information (Powell and Smith-Doerr 1994; Zajac and Olsen 1993) depends on a foundation of trust (Powell 1990; Ring and Van de Ven 1994). When parties trust one another, they can adjust to unanticipated contingencies in jointly optimal ways without having to renegotiate with opportunistic partners (Loretz 1988). In addition, trust facilitates parties' use of informal agreements that enhance the flexibility of formal procedures, thereby promoting collaboration (Ring and Van de Ven 1994).

Negative political behaviors pose a serious threat to the development and maintenance of trust both within and between organizations because they inflict harm on individuals. Trust is based on expectations that another party will behave in ways that are helpful or at least not harmful (Gambetta 1988). Because negative political behaviors are harmful, they can not only inhibit the development of trust but destroy existing trust.
Thus, negative political behaviors are detrimental to the trust creation process, hampering the conduct of vital collaborative work.

Finally, evidence abounds that employees’ loyalty at any organization is and will become increasingly fragile (Stroh and Reilly 1997). Employees’ satisfaction with their jobs, their loyalty, and commitment are no longer guaranteed by either psychological or instrumental contracts. In addition, employees’ perceptions of their obligations to their employers have been significantly decreased by their employers’ failure to uphold commitments (Robinson 1996). In organizations in which negative political behavior is pervasive, loyalty accrues to individual people as opposed to whole organizations (McGrath 1995). This kind of outcome is particularly damaging when organizational loyalty is in short supply and crucial for attracting and retaining employees. In short, conditions such as a corrosive political climate that sever or damage fragile employee attachments put organizations at risk in terms of both higher costs and limited flexibility.

A View of Negative Political Behavior from the Literature

Research on negative political behavior in organizations has taken two distinct trajectories. The first examines occurrences of such behavior from the point of view of resource dependence, focusing on how and why these kinds of tactics are used. For the most part, researchers from this vein consider both the positive and negative effects of political behavior. They investigate political behaviors that are not inherently negative but that can adversely affect organizational decisions and performance. For example, when resources are scarce, coalition building can contribute to a project’s success by rallying needed support (Brown 1995). By contrast, in a rapidly changing but otherwise munificent environment, coalition building may result in failure by slowing down and lowering the quality of decision making (Pfeffer 1992).

The second research path focuses on perceptions of negative political behavior—both on political behaviors that are inherently harmful and on the negative effects of neutral political behaviors. This path was blazed by researchers interested in the antecedents and outcomes of perceptions of political behavior in organizations. These researchers consider the targets of negative behavior: what they see and how they respond.

Both research camps share four assumptions about negative political behavior. First, all researchers agree that political behavior in organiza-
tions is a normal part of conducting business. Politics infect strategic decision making (Eisenhardt and Bourgeois 1988), the allocation of budgets (Pfeffer and Salancik 1974), human resource decisions (Ferris and King 1991), the collection and use of information used for forecasting and modeling (Davenport, Eccles, and Prusak 1992), and the innovation process (Kieschel 1988). Furthermore, political actors can be specific individuals or interact formal or informal groups (Cobb 1986; D'vory and Romm, 1990). Second, many adopt what is called a constructionist perspective, which assumes that perceptions of behavior as political are important for understanding employee behavior, rather than objective behaviors. These perceptions are complex and fluid, being highly sensitive to the changing conditions in a potentially political situation and to the characteristics of the observer (D'vory and Romm 1988). Third, both camps acknowledge that politics are in and of themselves not bad. Rather, certain types of actions and behaviors generate more destructive and hurtful consequences than others. Fourth, most researchers agree that the negative side of political behavior may be most apparent under conditions in which resources become scarce, outcomes are uncertain, and there is limited sanctioning of political behavior.

**Contributors to Negative Political Behavior**

The two research paths on the occurrence and perceptions of politics in organizations identify two distinctly different sets of contributors. For researchers interested in the frequency of actual political actions in organizations, the findings are consistent with what is typically called the strategic contingencies view of power (Hickson et al. 1971). In general, political behavior is more likely to occur when uncertainty is present, the situation is important to the organization, the issue is salient and important to the individuals involved (Madison et al. 1980), and conflicting interests exist such that individuals or groups are differentially affected by the situation (Pfeffer 1992).

Researchers frequently cluster the probable causes of perception of negative political behavior into three categories: (1) organizational-level factors, (2) job or work environment factors, and (3) personal-level contributors to the perception and, by implication, execution of negative political behavior. A large number of studies have been tests of a framework proposed by Ferris, Russ, and Fandt (1989), who first presented this
tripartite classification scheme. The findings from this research suggest the following:

- At the organizational level, power concentrated at the top, lower levels of formalization, and higher levels in the hierarchy are correlated with stronger perceptions of political behavior (Ferris et al. 1996; Parker et al. 1995).

- Job and work environment conditions also contribute to the perception of negative political behavior. Restricted job autonomy, reduced career development opportunities, lower job variety, less job feedback, restricted advancement opportunity, a perception of unfair reward practices, lower levels of intergroup cooperation across units, and poor quality of interactions with coworkers and supervisors have contributed to stronger perceptions of political behavior (Ferris and Kacmar 1992; Ferris et al. 1996; Parker et al. 1995).

- Empirical support for when and how personal-level variables predict perceptions of political behavior has been uneven. Some studies have supported the idea that men see more political behavior in their organizations than women (Drory and Beary 1991; Ferris et al. 1996), and that persons of minority status see political behavior more than nonminority status individuals (Parker et al. 1995), as do people who are younger (Ferris et al. 1996). However, the mixed support for these findings makes it difficult to draw any firm conclusions about how these attributes contribute to perceptions of political behavior.

Negative Political Behavior: The Process Gap

Although researchers have been diligent about identifying possible contributors to the occasion of and perception of negative political behavior, they have been silent about the interpersonal processes through which negative political behavior affects critical employee attitudes and important organizational processes. In this section, we discuss the influence of negative political behavior on trust as one of these crucial interpersonal processes and present a model of this relationship. We propose that the impact of negative political behavior on employees’ trust in one another as well as in their organization exacts a heavy toll on organizational functioning.

Current research only mentions in passing that negative political be-
haviors destroy trust and damage interpersonal relationships (e.g., Ferris and Kacmar 1992; Madison et al. 1980; Vredenburgh and Maurer 1984). This is surprising considering that recent work on violations of trust investigates many behaviors that are also classified as negative political behaviors, such as promoting someone who does not meet the necessary criteria, stealing ideas or credit, and using confidential information to a person’s own advantage (Bies and Tripp 1996). The overlap between negative political behaviors and violations of trust is significant because research on violations of trust (e.g., Bies and Tripp 1996; Morrison and Robinson 1997; Robinson 1996) provides insight into the interpersonal processes through which negative political behavior influences important organizational processes. Figure 1-1 provides an overview of our model.

Negative Political Behavior and the Heavy Toll of Distrust

Trust is one party’s willingness to rely on the actions of another in a situation involving the risk of the other’s opportunistic behavior (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995; Zand 1972). Trust is violated when expectations that another party will act in trustworthy, nonopportunistic ways are not met.

When trust is violated, individuals experience anger, hurt, fear, and frustration, causing them to reassess their feelings about the violator (Lewicki and Bunker 1996). Violations of trust often increase individuals’ perceptions that another party is untrustworthy and cause negative emotions that decrease their emotional bond to that party. Consequently, violations cause cognitive and emotional responses that may decrease individuals’ trust in others.

Although all violations of trust may reduce trust, negative political behavior is particularly likely to do so because perceptions of negative political behavior are associated with attributions of self-serving motives. While some violations of trust may be attributed to extenuating circumstances and, therefore, not affect trust (Sitkin and Roth 1993), negative political behavior is attributed to agents’ political motives. And this internal attribution for the cause of the violation should consistently result in targets’ decreased trust in agents (Sitkin and Roth 1993).

Negative political behavior is also likely to influence targets’ trust in
Figure 1.1. Negative political behavior and outcomes of trust.
their organization (e.g., organizational trust). Organizational trust decreases when targets attribute some of the responsibility for the agent’s actions to the organization (e.g., systemic responsibility attributions; Bies and Tripp 1996). Through rumination about an organizational incident, targets often come to believe that the individuals in authority are partially responsible for the incident because these individuals have encouraged or failed to curb the agent’s untrustworthy behavior (Bies, Tripp, and Kramer 1996).

Although systemic responsibility attributions can result from the behavior of any organizational member, people in higher authority positions than the target more often elicit systemic attributions because targets regularly view individuals in these positions as organizational representatives. Thus, an agent’s position in the organization may moderate the relationship between negative political behavior and perceptions of an organization’s trustworthiness. When agents are more powerful than targets, it is more likely that perceptions of the agent’s negative political behavior will decrease the target’s trust in the organization.

The adverse effects of negative political behavior on both interpersonal and organizational trust are critical because of their links to organizationally relevant outcomes. Figure 1-1 depicts relevant outcomes that are negatively affected by decreased trust, such as job involvement (Robinson 1996), the willingness of employees to accept decisions (Tyler and Degoey 1996), information sharing (Curtall and Judge 1995; Powell 1990; Ring and Van de Ven 1994), and interpersonal citizenship (McAlister 1995).

Furthermore, negative political behavior can create a vicious feedback loop between low trust and suspicion. In corrosive political environments, for example, negative political behavior decreases both interpersonal and organizational trust, which increases suspicion. Subsequently, suspicion makes the perception of self-serving, political motives more likely because it fosters the tendency to frame social situations negatively and to make overly personalistic attributions for the causes of events. Thus, negative political behavior can create a vicious cycle by decreasing trust, increasing suspicion, and increasing the likelihood that future behavior will be perceived as political.

In summary, we have asserted that negative political behavior affects organizational processes through trust. We proposed that through its effect on interpersonal trust and employees’ trust in their organizations, negative political behavior affects organizational functioning, exacting a
heavy toll on organizations' dynamic capabilities, collaborative potential, and employee loyalty. The following sections build on this foundation by describing an ambitious agenda for future research and by considering the practical issues of managing negative political behaviors.

Looking Toward the Future: A Research Agenda

Future research should consider two critical areas: (1) individuals' emotional responses to negative political behavior, and (2) cross-level effects of and influences on negative political behavior. We chose these two areas to challenge researchers to investigate the complicated ways in which negative political behavior affects individuals and organizations.

Individual Emotional Responses and Negative Political Behavior

In our model, we illustrate how microprocesses including emotion link negative political behavior to trust and thereby to organizational outcomes. This model provides a springboard for investigating the broader question. What are the emotional consequences of negative political behavior for individuals, their relationships, and the organization? Three additional questions must be addressed:

1. What situational, relational, and person-level factors affect individuals' emotional responses to political behavior?

2. What conditions cause negative political behavior to lead to different emotions such as anger versus fear or frustration?

3. Under what circumstances do negative emotions lead to constructive outcomes, such as people speaking out and engaging in relational work that allows them to resolve interpersonal problems and reconcile divergent perspectives?

Recent work on coercion provides a starting point for investigating the emotional experience of negative political behavior. This research investigates many behaviors that can also be classified as negative political behaviors. Negative political behaviors that intentionally impose harm or force compliance are, by definition, coercive acts (e.g., threatening, blaming, and denigrating others; Tedeschi and Felson 1994). Although all negative political behaviors are not coercive acts (i.e., some do not intentionally cause harm), coercive acts prompt attributions of blame and perceptions of injustice, which are associated with anger (Tedeschi and
Felson 1994). Thus, negative political behaviors should frequently trigger anger (although this anger may not be expressed toward the agent).

Expressed or not, anger is energizing, prompting action but disrupting and disorganizing cognitive processes, reducing attention to social skills and long-term consequences (Tedeschi and Felson 1994). Moreover, anger focuses targets' attention on the anger-inducing incident and their victim status. The potential negative organizational impact of anger is clear. Angry employees may be less able and willing to perform due to anger-induced cognitive deficits and distraction. This may be a particularly important consequence for knowledge workers whose work is highly contingent on cognitive capacity and engagement. In addition, anger can lead to self-defeating behavior; individuals may take unreasonable risks because they fail to consider the long-term consequences of their actions (Leith and Baumeister 1996). Furthermore, because anger reduces attention to social skills (Tedeschi and Felson 1994), target individuals who are angry may inadvertently damage their relationships with co-collaborators, thus affecting an organization's collaborative potential.

However, anger also has potentially positive effects. Expressed anger can focus attention on issues that concern the aggrieved individual and thereby serve the constructive function of prompting solutions to interpersonal problems (Tedeschi and Felson 1994). Unfortunately, the positive potential of anger within organizations may go largely unrealized. For instance, Felson (1984) found that anger was often not expressed toward other individuals in the work setting.

Hochschild (1983) also captured this phenomenon in her concept of "feeling rules," which she found generally inhibited employees from expressing negative emotions. Furthermore, these feeling rules may apply differentially to individuals based on their gender or power position within an organization (Pierce 1995). For example, Pierce (1995) found that litigation lawyers were expected to express negative emotions, whereas paralegals were not. Similarly, Tedeschi and Felson (1994) note that "in many cases the unjust person has superior status to the grievant and cannot be challenged without incurring unacceptable costs" (p. 237).

Thus, people often do not express anger in order to avoid damaging their relationship with the individual who has provoked them (Deshields, Jenkins, and Tait 1989). However, unexpressed anger may be costly; an individual's energy level may decrease, making it difficult for him or her to persist with other tasks (Baumeister et al. 1998). For instance, Baumeister et al. (1998) found that suppressing emotion led to a subsequent
drop in performance. Thus, the anger induced by negative political behavior can prompt a wide range of responses that can significantly influence organizational functioning. And, the ability to express and use anger constructively may be constrained by contextual, relational, and personal factors, which need to be elaborated through future research.

**Cross-Level Effects on Negative Political Behavior**

The model we have presented in this chapter proposes how negative political behavior can affect individuals’ trust in one another and in their employing organization. In addition to our model-specific hypotheses, we have selected several other important cross-level issues that warrant research attention. The critical research questions we pose in this section are as follows:

1. How does negative political behavior escalate?
2. When and how does it become a threat to the organization?
3. How do events external to the organization influence the political climate within the organization?

To address these questions, we explore the possibility of micro- and macrolinking mechanisms that affect perceptions of negative political behavior across levels of analysis. Microlinking mechanisms connect negative political behaviors that occur between individuals to groups, the organization, and interorganizational relationships. These such mechanisms are social identity, ambient emotion, and social rumination. We also contend that there are macromechanisms at the organizational and extraorganizational levels of analysis that influence perceptions of negative political behavior at the interpersonal level, for example, adaptive cycles and meta-narratives. Taken together, these five cross-level mechanisms and their interrelationships represent a next crucial step in understanding the effects of political behavior.

**Micro Cross-Level Influences on Negative Political Behavior**

Negative political behaviors such as scapegoating and intimidation are often social episodes that have many witnesses (Harvey 1989; Jackall 1988). However, the processes through which an episode of negative political behavior between two individuals affects larger numbers of employees are rarely investigated. Social identification is one such process. Social
identification refers to "the perception of oneness with or belongingness to a human aggregate" (Ashforth and Mael 1989, 22). Organizational members have multiple group memberships. They may strongly identify with groups based on demographic categories such as race, gender, or nationality; professional categories such as accountant or engineer; and organizationally specific groups such as a product development team, profit center, or the organization itself. When an agent threatens the identity of a member of a group through negative political behavior (Bies et al. 1996), the emotional and cognitive consequences may also affect other members who strongly identify with that group (Dutton, Duchon, and Harquail 1994). Moreover, this threat may have different effects depending on the agent's power and whether he or she is also a group member. For instance, negative political behavior by a low-powered in-group member may be ignored, whereas negative political behavior by a high-powered in-group member may be seen as the ultimate betrayal of the in-group, causing anger, confusion, and disillusionment.

A second process with cross-level effects is emotion. Emotions can permeate a social environment. For example, political behavior can lead to tension so palpable that employees "can cut it with a knife" or fear that causes everyone "to walk on egg shells." Often these feelings of tension and fear become disembodied. These emotions seem to be an ambient property of the workplace rather than feelings about or between specific individuals. Furthermore, different emotions may have significantly different effects when they permeate an organization. For example, contextualized fear may paralyze decision making (Pfeffer 1992), whereas contextualized anger may lead to organizationally motivated aggression (Anderson and Pearson 1997). This phenomenon of ambient emotion leads us to ask: How do the negative emotions generated by political behavior become an integral part of employees' shared work experience?

A third cross-level process is social rumination. Negative political behavior often leads to social rumination, a process in which the target and observers try to make sense of the event by discussing it with coworkers and friends (Bies et al. 1996). Because social rumination often reinforces the initial suspicion, decreased trust, and outrage triggered by an episode (Bies and Tripp 1996), it may cause distrust to spread beyond targets, to observers and others who indirectly hear about episodes of negative political behavior.

In addition, social rumination creates suspicion, which may have other important effects across organizational levels. For instance, people
view individuals within their own group as more trustworthy than those in other groups (Brewer 1979; Kramer, Brewer and Hanna 1996). Therefore, when individuals are suspicious of members within their own group, they are likely to become suspicious of individuals from other groups within and among organizations.

In sum, the potential for social identification, emotion, and social rumination to spread the effects of negative political behavior across levels of analysis has not received much attention. We propose that understanding how suspicion, negative emotion, and distrust spread is critical to understanding how and when organizations reach the “tipping point,” the point when negative political behavior within an organization escalates into a corrosive political climate and threatens organizational functioning.

Macro Cross-Level Influences on Negative Political Behavior

Although researchers rarely investigate macrolevel influences on individuals’ perceptions of negative political behavior, we believe that investigating how events external to organizations influence the political climate within organizations is a promising future research direction. We propose that adaptive cycles and meta-narratives are two factors that may influence perceptions of negative political behavior among individuals. Adaptive cycles refer to organization-level cycles that influence the ability of individuals within organizations to react constructively to political behavior. For instance, researchers might investigate whether different organizations have cycles of increased and decreased workload and time pressure that cause people to perceive political behavior differently. For example, during income tax time in a public accounting firm, potentially political behavior may be attributed to external unstable factors associated with time pressure rather than to self-serving motives. Thus, organizations may have their own narrative accounts that excuse certain types of behavior at certain times by attributing the blame to external forces.

Meta-narratives are stories about common or current events that are widely accepted as part of popular discourse and reflect a society’s values and beliefs. For example, meta-narratives about U.S. business and global competition may explain why organizations need to downsize or why union workers should make wage concessions.

The effects of meta-narratives on employees’ perceptions of what constitutes fair, appropriate, apolitical behavior have not been investigated. For example, changes in the dominant meta-narratives about gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class may affect people’s perceptions
of political behavior and the accounts they use to explain their experience. Researchers might ask, How have the meta-narratives about the "glass ceiling," sexual harassment, or affirmative action influenced employees' interpretations of and perspectives on negative political behaviors? Likewise, researchers might look at the influence of cyclical trends in management meta-narratives (e.g., philosophies; Abrahamson 1996) on employees' perceptions of how they should be treated and what constitutes self-serving versus justifled behavior.

Research Implications

Implementing the research agenda we have presented requires research methodologies that are not traditionally used by researchers investigating negative political behavior. In this section, we present research methodologies to complement our research agenda. Table 1-1 summarizes our proposed research questions and methodological suggestions.

The first item on our agenda focused on individual's emotional responses to negative political behavior. Research on stressful life events (Harvey, Orbuch, and Weber 1990), violations of trust (Bies and Tripp 1996), and anger-inducing incidents (Baumeister, Stillwell, and Wotman 1990) suggests that accounts or micro-narratives are a research methodology that will shed light on individuals' emotional experiences of negative political behavior.

Accounts are "story-like constructions that contain individuals' recollections of events, including plot, story line, affect, and attributions" (Orbuch 1997, 459). They allow researchers to examine how individuals experience events, provide a fuller understanding than standard surveys (Orbuch 1997), and have high external validity (Baumeister, Stillwell, and Wotman 1990). In addition, because accounts include both emotive information and attributions about a specific event, they are particularly well-suited to the study of negative political behavior that triggers emotion and depends on attributions of self-serving motives. Moreover, accounts can be used to answer a variety of research questions because once accounts are coded, they can be analyzed qualitatively (Harvey, Orbuch, and Weber 1990) or treated as quantifiable categories (e.g., Baumeister, Stillwell, and Wotman 1990).

The second part of our research agenda focused on three cross-level mechanisms: social identity, ambient emotion, and social rumination. In addition to the insights that accounts can provide, questions relating to
how each of these mechanisms extends the effects of political behavior between individuals to groups, the organization, and interorganizational relationships can be better understood using network analysis. A modified version of a network survey would permit researchers to determine whom people speak with about political episodes, whom they go to when negative emotional events occur, and how networks of social rumination and negative emotion are influenced by social identification. Moreover, once researchers have described organizational networks, they are in a position to investigate how the network is affected by various political episodes and how emotional responses to events vary with individuals’ network positions (see Wasserman and Faust 1994 for detailed information on network methodology).

Of course, other methodologies such as interviews, standard surveys, and observations are feasible. For example, observation may be invaluable in understanding the process of social rumination in organizations. Likewise, standard surveys may allow estimation of individuals’ salient group identifications.

The third part of our research agenda focused on macro cross-level effects. For investigating the effect of adaptive cycles on perceptions of political behavior, interviews could determine what cycles exist. Then surveys using vignettes could be used to determine whether employees perceive the same behaviors differently when they occur during different cycles.

For investigating the effect of meta-narratives on perceptions of political behavior, archival data could be used. Popular literature could be used to determine the dominant meta-narratives in different time periods, and data on negative behaviors such as those documented in grievances, lawsuits, and exit interviews could be used to determine changing perceptions of negative political behavior.

In sum, we propose that accounts, network analysis, vignettes, and archival data represent important methodologies for future research on negative political behavior.

**Getting Practical: Dealing with Negative Political Behavior in Practice**

We see three different areas where managers can make a meaningful difference in reducing the toll from corrosive political environments by both
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<tr>
<th>Sample Questions</th>
<th>Research Methodologies</th>
<th>Methodologically Relevant Sample Studies</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td><strong>1. Emotional response</strong></td>
<td>Accounts, interviews</td>
<td>Accounts: Baumeister, Stillwell, and Wotman (1990); Bies and Tripp (1996); Harvey, Obruch, and Weber (1990)</td>
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<td>▶ What are the emotional consequences of negative political behavior for individuals, their relationships, and the organization?</td>
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b. Emotion
   ▲ How do the negative emotions generated by political behavior become an integral part of employees' shared work experience?

c. Social rumination
   ▲ How does social rumination (i.e., the collective narration of political episodes) influence the components of a corrosive political climate, for instance, suspicion and distrust?
   ▲ How does social rumination interact with social identification and emotion to create corrosive political climates?

2. Macro cross-level effects
   ▲ How do events external to the organization influence the political climate within the organization?

   a. Adaptive cycles
      ▲ How have the meta-narratives about the "glass ceiling," sexual harassment, or affirmative action influenced employees' interpretations of and perspectives on negative political behaviors?

   b. Meta-narratives
      ▲ How and under what conditions do organization-level cycles of workload and time pressure influence individuals' reactions to potentially political behavior?

| Network survey methodology, interviews, accounts | See below |
| Network survey methodology, interviews, accounts; also observation |  |
| Interviews, survey methodology (vignettes) | Vignettes |
| Archival data | Archival data/cycles |
reducing the incidence of negative political behaviors in organizations and thinking proactively about how to equip people to deal more effectively with these types of behaviors:

1. Building Awareness. Although it is common knowledge in most organizations that political behaviors are exhibited, knowledge regarding the damage caused by negative political behavior is not commonly known nor discussed. Managers would benefit from building awareness of both the consequences of outbreaks of negative political behavior and the conditions that encourage these outbreaks.

Building awareness is important because managers often underestimate the impact of negative political behavior. In most cases, the effects of incidences of negative political behavior are felt most acutely at lower levels of the organization, where individuals have fewer opportunities and resources to combat such occurrences or deal with their aftereffects. Upper management may not be aware of the true consequences of such episodes. As Spitzer (1995) describes the awareness gap: "They (managers) underestimate the importance of what they consider to be 'minor irritations' in their organizations; they don't realize how large those irritations loom in the subjective experience of employees" (p. 57).

Creating an awareness of negative political behavior and its potential damage is difficult because people "see" incidents of negative political behavior differently. The research results on political perceptions showed that what one "sees" depends greatly on where one sits in the organization. As a result, managers must work hard to create common awareness and understanding of the negative fallout from negative political behavior. It is important to build awareness that acting quickly to deal directly with the causes of negative political behavior reduces the emotional and behavioral toll from these kinds of behavioral outbreaks.

2. Allowing Expression. This chapter has emphasized the emotional pain experienced by organizational members who are targets of negative political behavior. At a practice level, organizational practices and individuals' reactions to negative political behavior can amplify or depress the negative emotional toll by allowing for expression of the affect or feelings induced by these behaviors. Research on stress and burnout in organizations suggests the heavy toll paid by individuals who work in organizational contexts that treat these conditions as emotional states that need to be snuffed out or suppressed (Meyerson 1998). Instead, at a practical
level, organizations could work toward honoring the feelings of individuals who work in settings infected by negative political behaviors or who have to deal with work transactions where emotions are traditionally suppressed. "Rather than developing procedures to produce phony smiles or prevent the showing of emotion, training programs might help employees to develop their individual response styles and to understand their ongoing social and task conditions" (Mumby and Punnam 1992, 478). This kind of reaction to negative political behavior may mean that organizations and the people within them will need to provide significant relational work (Fletcher 1994; Jacques 1996) or caregiving to restore and repair the damage caused by acts of negative political behavior (see also Meyerson 1998).

3. Encouraging Action. Organizations can behave in ways that prevent or respond to negative political behavior. We consider both. In both cases, we urge practitioners to reframe the role of managers in creating the conditions for negative political behaviors to flourish. Rather than thinking of managers as politicians, we would like to consider managers as architects of contexts that either encourage or discourage negative political behavior and, in so doing, damage or sustain corrosive political climates in organizations.

Preventative Actions

Three preventative zones stand out as possibilities for reducing the frequency or severity of negative political behavior in organizations. None are easy to execute and all take time and substantial effort to sustain. However, none of these preventative actions can alone alter what Frost (1987) calls the "deep structure games" of politics in organizations, which are often embedded in rules and other structures that transcend any particular organization. But, within a particular organization, there are actions that can alter the political system. First, politics in general, and negative political behavior in particular, are less likely when there is a clear correspondence between performance and rewards and when performance criteria are objective and measurable; there are simply fewer opportunities for individuals to seek rewards for actions other than good performance, and agreement about what is good performance or not is more easily achieved. Thus, a significant deterrent to negative political behavior is a careful and clearly designed performance evaluation and reward system.
Second, negative political behavior is less likely when norms encourage opposite behavior. For example, Covey (1993) argues that cultural practices sustained by clear, collective norms are critical to creating organizations with affirmative values. Where these values thrive, negative political behaviors are less likely to emerge or be tolerated if they do. He suggests making norms explicit. For example, members of an organization could declare that "we will not talk about each other behind each other's back" as a step toward moving away from a "swamp culture," where adversarialism, legalism, protectionism, and politics run rampant, toward an "oasis culture," where such behaviors are far less likely (Covey 1993).

Of course, clear norms for behaviors that counteract negative political behavior only work if norm compliance is rewarded and norm deviance is punished. Thus, there must be clear and compelling consequences associated with the perpetrators of negative political behavior.

A third preventative measure focuses on designing lines of communication so that organizational members know that there are "safe" avenues to share information on negative political behavior and that perpetrators will suffer the consequences of their actions. In addition to encouraging the raising of potentially critical information, "opening up lines of communication helps to diminish the value of the network that politically-oriented middle managers rely on for their power base" (McGrath 1995, 53). Thus, there is a twofold value in carefully architecting lines of communication that encourage information sharing about negative political behavior.

**Responsive Actions**

Not all negative political behavior can be prevented. In fact, it is highly unlikely that the design of any system of rewards, norms, or communication lines can extinguish outbreaks of negative political behavior in organizations. Thus, managers would be well-advised to consider when and how to respond once such behaviors come forth. We suggest three strategies.

First, as we have already mentioned, it is important that incidences of negative political behavior be acknowledged and responded to with quick and decisive negative sanctions. Second, in addition to providing sanctions for agents, managers should also provide emotional support for targets. Expressions of care, sensitivity, and understanding may lessen employees' negative emotional response to perceived negative political behav-
ior and mitigate the adverse effects of such behavior on employees' trust in their organization. Third, managers may offer understanding to agents. Offering the understanding that all employees are fallible may reduce agents' defensive behavior, allowing a more constructive dialogue between targets and agents, while increasing the likelihood that agents will apologize or work hard to repair the relationship. Managerial behaviors that facilitate apologies are important because apologies often reduce the adverse impact of negative actions (e.g., destructive criticism; Baron 1990).

Conclusion

Corrosive political climates and the negative political behaviors that create them are a pressing problem for organizations. While always an empirical fact, the toll paid by organizations for the damage caused by negative political behaviors has skyrocketed. We can only imagine that the cost will intensify with "mergers, restructuring and other reorganizations that create fertile ground for politics to grow and prosper" (McGrath 1995). Given this forecast, we see this chapter as an urgent call for meaningful research and informed practice that takes seriously what we currently know and are seeking to learn about the causes, consequences, and processes of negative political behavior in organizations. We believe that understanding the processes through which negative political behavior affects individuals, groups, and interorganizational relationships will enable organizations to prevent, contain, and mitigate the adverse effects of such behavior for individuals and organizations.

References

Baron, R. A. 1990. "Countering the Effects of Destructive Criticism: The Rela-


