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Managing Power: The Practical Work of Negotiating Interests

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to investigate how adult educators negotiate power and interests in program planning for training and development in a corporate setting. The research methodology was a descriptive qualitative study of typical program planning practices of adult educators in a multi-national corporation. The chief finding was that planners' "practical" strategic action for negotiating interests and power varied according to specific situations and how planners perceived the involvement of various stakeholders.

Theoretical Framework

Adult education program planning literature has historically focused primarily on the more technical aspects of program planning (Sork & Buskey, 1986; Wilson & Cervero, 1997). By now very familiar to most adult educators, these technical aspects of program planning encompass some version of a step-wise process of assessing needs, defining learning objectives, creating learning experiences and selecting content, managing programs, and evaluating them (Apps, 1979; Boone, 1985; Boyle, 1981; Knowles, 1980; Langenbach, 1988; Sork & Buskey, 1986; Sork & Caffarella, 1989; Tyler, 1949). Sork (1996, 2000) refers to these steps as ones which fall along the technical dimension of program planning.

Research in the past decade, however, has begun to focus attention on what Sork (1996, 2000) refers to as the socio-political and ethical dimensions of program planning. To this end, Cervero and Wilson (1994, 1996, 1998) have argued that program planning be understood as a social activity in which adult educators negotiate personal and organizational interests within relationships of power. Their research has demonstrated that interests are causally related to which programs get planned. A number of investigations have demonstrated the centrality of negotiating power and interests (e.g., Archie-Booker, Cervero, & Langone, 1999; McClean, 1997; Mills, Cervero, Langone, & Wilson, 1995; Rees, Cervero, Moshi, & Wilson, 1997; Sessions & Cervero, 1999; Wilson, 1999). From this work we can say with some confidence that we know *what* adult educators do. Although the case studies in Cervero and Wilson (1994; 1996) and other studies offer some important insights, we know relatively less, however, about *how* adult educators actually negotiate multiple and often conflicting interests in practice.

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relationships of power. Their research has demonstrated that interests are causally related to which programs get planned. A number of investigations have demonstrated the centrality of negotiating power and interests (e.g., Archie-Booker, Cervero, & Langone, 1999; McClean, 1997; Mills, Cervero, Langone, & Wilson, 1995; Rees, Cervero, Moshi, & Wilson, 1997; Sessions & Cervero, 1999; Wilson, 1999). From this work we can say with some confidence that we know *what* adult educators do. Although the case studies in Cervero and Wilson (1994; 1996) and other studies offer some important insights, we know relatively less, however, about *how* adult educators actually negotiate multiple and often conflicting interests in practice.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study, then, was to investigate how adult educators negotiate power and interests in program planning for training and development in a corporate setting. This study is significant because it sought to investigate what successful program planners actually know and do by examining the actual tactics and strategies used by HRD practitioners. Understanding the practical negotiation strategies employed by adult educators could be instrumental in improving program planning practice.

Methodology

Using qualitative methodology, we structured an interview protocol based on Yang's seven influence tactics to investigate the specific negotiation strategies used by fourteen adult educators at three different sites of a large, multi-national financial services corporation. In addition to interviews, we used critical incident questionnaires and document analysis to gather data. Using the constant-comparative method, our findings have revealed that adult educators do, indeed, know a great deal "practically" about how they negotiate power and interests. We use this paper to report on the specific tactics planners used to negotiate power and interests.

Findings

While Yang's "discursive" strategies were evident, the chief finding was that the "practical" strategic action of negotiation varied according to the specific situation. The planners' tactics for negotiating power and interests reflected the following phenomenon: 1) the tactics employed depended on the planners' perceptions of the stakeholders in terms of how much power the stakeholder could exercise in the situation; 2) the planners' perceptions of stakeholder power were arrayable into five separate categories along a continuum of desired stakeholder involvement (i.e., planners' perception of various stakeholder involvement ranged from "not involved" with the program on one end of the continuum to "very involved" in the program planning process on the other end); 3) the specific tactics (of which seventeen were evident in this study), then, varied according to which category the planners perceived the stakeholders to represent (see Figure 1).

In other words, the specific negotiation tactics that the planners employed depended upon what sort of involvement they wanted from each stakeholder. For example, if the planner wanted little involvement from the stakeholder (perhaps because this stakeholder could have slowed them down or possibly have hurt their efforts), their tactics might have included some form of

circumvention. On the other hand (and on the other end of the stakeholder involvement spectrum), if the planner wanted the stakeholder to become personally involved in the program (perhaps as a subject matter expert), then the tactics employed might have included a direct appeal to the stakeholders' ego. The tactics employed, then (almost all at a practical level of consciousness) were done so to elicit certain behaviors from various stakeholders involved in the planning process.

In addition, the planners in this study manifested their own power by both maintaining as well as by transforming relationships of power through employing both substantive as well as meta-negotiations (Cervero & Wilson, 1998; Elgstrom & Riis, 1992; Umble, 1998). In almost every case, the planners had strongly held notions of not only what needed to be done, but also how it should be done.

They then used these tactical strategies (as outlined in Figure 1) to negotiate power and interests - practically, not discursively - among the key stakeholders in their organizations to accomplish their objectives by either maintaining or transforming relationships of power. Indeed, these substantive and meta-negotiations strategies were often used simultaneously. Cervero and Wilson (1998) write about these phenomena:

Thus, substantive and meta-negotiations are simultaneously interwoven in daily practice... Using the metaphor of the planning table, we have shown how adult educators are always simultaneously negotiating about the important features of educational programs (substantive negotiations) and about the political relationship of those who are included and excluded from such negotiations (meta-negotiations). (p. 20)

In other words, the planners employed both substantive as well as meta-negotiations strategies to, essentially, alter the relationships of power to make it more productive for them.

Essentially, placing someone in the "low involvement" category was akin to either keeping them in the dark altogether, or at least ensuring that the stakeholder had the least level of participation as possible. Stakeholders in this category were often ones who possessed enough power to potentially hurt the program planning efforts. Moving along the involvement axis, "general program awareness" was where the planner wanted the stakeholder to be aware of the program and to hear good things about it. The only level of involvement that the stakeholders in the general program awareness category needed was to be generally aware, in a positive way, about the program.

Stakeholders in the "buy-in" category were expected to be moderately involved with the program. This moderate involvement included understanding the program, and buying in to its objectives. The "mobilizing resources" category included the stakeholder mobilizing resources for the program such as money, people, time, etc. This was a much more significant level of involvement on the part of key stakeholder. As such, the negotiation tactics intensified.

Finally, the "high personal involvement" category constituted the most intense level of personal involvement on the part of the stakeholder. As a result, all of the negotiations strategies sought to

transform relationships of power through meta-negotiations. Stakeholders in this category were expected to get personally involved in the program through expending their own time or expertise.

Figure 1: Key Findings from Interviews with Program Planners

<p>Stakeholder Is: Very Involved</p>	<p>High Personal Involvement Stakeholder is personally involved (i.e., time, expertise, etc.)</p>	<p>N & I Tactics:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appealing to egos and subject matter expertise • Engaging in some sort of exchange or horsetrading • Applying subtle pressure - a.k.a. "the velvet hammer"
	<p>Mobilizing Resources Stakeholder mobilizes resources including people, \$, time, etc.</p>	<p>N & I Tactics:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employing a "one-down" strategy • Making the business case for a program idea • Pushing stakeholders' "hot buttons"
<p>Moderately Involved</p>	<p>Buy-In Stakeholder understands program and buys-in</p>	<p>N & I Tactics:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consulting with and seeking critical feedback • Making the "buy-in" process more convenient by walking people through the program • Proactively seeking out and sharing positive feedback • Employing a "one-up" strategy
	<p>General Program Awareness Stakeholder is aware of program and is hearing good things about it</p>	<p>N & I Tactics:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forming committees to "evangelize" to their peers • Using organizational communication vehicles to publicize the program • Getting to "mass" by running a successful pilot program
<p>Not Involved</p>	<p>Low Involvement Stakeholder is not aware of what is going on / is not rendering any harm to program</p>	<p>N & I Tactics:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flying "under the radar screen" such that actions aren't visible • Sharing the smallest amount of information possible & designing alone • Setting the situation up for success by narrowing the universe of options • Avoiding people - "apologize later vs. ask for permission"

** "N & I" tactics indicates negotiation and influence tactics

Implications for Future Research

Perhaps the most pressing implication for future research centers around the ethics of program planning. When planners are faced with multiple and often conflicting interests, whose needs should they serve? Clearly, the organizations for which they work will almost always demand that the needs of those with the most power be served first. In response to this question, Cervero and Wilson (1994 & 1996) advocate that planners should employ a substantively democratic planning process in which the needs of all affected stakeholders should be considered. In reality, however, how do planners make those difficult decisions in the politically intricate settings in which they work?

A second and major implication for future research has to do with the replicability of this study in other kinds of organizations. These negotiation tactics were effective within the context of the Warde Financial Corporations - a large, mature, financial services corporation with a very deeply embedded set of corporate norms. However, it is unknown whether or not they would be effective within a smaller manufacturing firm or a high-tech firm, to name just a few examples.

A third implication for future research centers around the use of covert practices within organizations. Since this study reflected the use of a number of covert practices (flying under the radar screen, avoiding people, getting more powerful stakeholders to appeal to less powerful ones), it would be interesting to explore the theory and the practice behind the use of covert practices in organizations so to make connections with adult education program planning practices.

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