The Politics of Organizational Boundary Roles in Collective Bargaining

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The micro politics of labor and management negotiators' boundary role behavior is explored. A negotiator occupies a critical position from which to influence the outcomes of bargaining. A model of collective bargaining is presented that emphasizes the effects on bargaining outcomes of the psychological distances of the negotiators from their respective constituencies.

On a macro level, political action has long been an acknowledged aspect of collective bargaining. The attempt by union officials to acquire or expand leverage over political aspirants is a familiar feature of nearly every major election campaign. The use of mass media to mold public opinion in favor of union goals and objectives has figured prominently in a number of labor disputes. Particularly (but not exclusively) in the public sector, intervention by special interest groups during the course of negotiations has, at times, affected the course of bargaining and ultimately bargaining outcomes [Lincoln, 1967; Stagner, 1965].

Much less attention has been directed toward the micro politics that permeates the collective bargaining process — i.e., the behavior of individuals who occupy "organizational boundary roles" [Adams, 1976; Aldrich & Herker, 1977]. Labor organization, in general, features the creation of elites who act on behalf of employees. Management, in turn, has responded by the creation of labor relations specialists within personnel staffs. This appears to reflect a widespread belief that the employment of specialists in labor relations will improve labor-management interaction, resulting in a lower level of labor strife [Aldrich & Herker, 1977; Turner, Roberts, & Roberts, 1977]. Among the most significant of these "boundary actors," on behalf of both labor and management, are those who represent their constituencies in negotiating formal agreements. These negotiators occupy unique positions because of the nature of their transactions with external agents as well as their structural relationship to others within the organization. The critical function performed within the negotiator's boundary role is that of external representation [Aldrich & Herker, 1977], which affects the power of the focal organization with respect to the opposing organization.

This paper presents a model and offers a theoretical rationale explaining how the psychological distance of a negotiator from his or her constituency is related, through a number of intervening variables, to bargaining outcomes. In general, psycho-
logical distance is viewed as a function of the negotiator’s organizational centrality [Schein, 1971], the extent to which the constituents’ goals are understood by the negotiator, and the extent to which the private goals of the negotiator and the goals of the constituents are congruent. The negotiator’s psychological distance from the constituency is, in turn, reflected in bargaining outcomes to the extent that certain expectations and influences from the constituency, versus those of the negotiator’s opposite number, gain pre-eminence. The parameters of psychological distance between the boundary role person (BRP) and his/her constituency are elaborated. We conclude with a discussion of the probable relationships between bargaining outcomes and the joint distance of the negotiators from their respective constituencies.

Theoretical Framework

All types of social systems, including formal organizations, face a number of boundary-spanning problems, related to common boundaries with the other systems with which the organization is in contact. These boundary relationships tend to be complex [Evan, 1966], with characteristic uncertainty of outcomes. This uncertainty tends to foster the creation of specialized roles to perform the boundary-spanning function [Aldrich & Herker, 1977; Leifer & Delbecq, 1978].

In the case of formal organizations, the boundary-spanning interface is between the focal organization and one or more organizations in its organizational set [Evan, 1966]. One such interface occurs between the work organization and affiliated labor organizations.

Organizational boundaries are characteristically indefinite [Starbuck, 1976], and the organization-labor union boundary is particularly vague because of the frequency with which individuals enact roles on both sides of the boundary [Evan, 1966; March & Simon, 1958]. However, boundaries become more distinct when some aspect of the interaction context renders them salient. One such aspect is the bargaining process that constitutes labor-management negotiations.

This labor-management bargaining process might be viewed as political in at least three ways, though no attempt will be made to formalize the political content of the theory. First, traditional notions of politics focus on the influences surrounding the allocation of scarce resources — i.e., who gets what, where, and when [Lasswell, 1951]. Collective bargaining, like other personnel activities [Rosenbloom, 1975; Thompson, 1976], has obvious implications for the allocation of scarce resources and, therefore, is political in this broad sense.

Second, although our discussion is framed in the terminology of organization theory and organizational behavior, there are close parallels between political theory and organization theory, as Kaufman [1964] has convincingly argued. Organizational and interorganizational concepts such as legitimacy and goal consensus, for example, have parallel meanings and analytic uses in political science. From this perspective, our approach to collective bargaining as an organizational phenomenon has decidedly political connotations.

Finally, certain of the phenomena associated with bargaining discussed in this paper may be viewed as a manifestation of politics qua organizational politics [Frost & Hayes, 1977]. Mayes and Allen [1977, p. 675] define organizational politics as “the management of influence to obtain ends not sanctioned by the organization or to obtain sanctioned ends through non-sanctioned influence means.” The behavior of negotiators who manage influence to obtain nonsanctioned ends or who employ nonsanctioned means of influence conforms to this more explicit definition of politics in organizations.

The Organizational Boundary Role Concept

Traditional approaches to bargaining and negotiation often are formulated as party-opponent models [Rubin & Brown, 1975; Thomas, 1976] in which each party is viewed as a unitary entity having coherent and well-defined objectives and preferences. Furthermore, the parties to the negotiation are conceived as being in direct interface, each communicating directly with the other.

When the two parties to a negotiation are relatively complex organizations, a simple one-on-one model cannot reflect the complexity of the interorganizational bargaining relationship. Morley and Stephenson [1977, p. 285] presented the following criticism of such an oversimplified model:

There is a tendency in the literature on industrial relations, international relations and other areas of
intergroup activity to speak of relations between the ‘sides’ as somehow abstracted from the interaction of the members. The “power relationship” between the “sides” is somehow supposed to determine strategy and hence the outcomes of negotiations, independently of the decision by representatives to exploit, exaggerate, misperceive, minimize or otherwise interpret or use this power relationship in negotiations.

Complex organizations are characterized by, among other properties, the specialization of function through the creation of diverse organizational roles [Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964; Katz & Kahn, 1978]. The specialized class of roles that carry out the function of interaction between the organization and various elements in its environment has been termed organizational boundary roles [Adams, 1976]. Adams referred to one who performs a boundary role as a boundary role person (BRP) and listed three unique properties of boundary positions. First, the BRP is relatively distant, psychologically and organizationally, from the other members of the parent organization, while relatively close to the external environment, and, specifically, to the BRPs of other organizations. Second, the BRP is an organization’s representative to the external environment, and third, the BRP is an organization’s agent of influence over the environment.

Figure 1 is a structural model of negotiator interaction in collective bargaining. While the negotiator’s proximity to the external environment (i.e., the opposing organization, as represented by its negotiator) facilitates carrying out his or her boundary role functions, the concomitant distance from the parent organization can create difficulties. The BRP may find that, in some respects, there is more in common with one’s opposite member in negotiations than with the parent organization. Suspicion may arise regarding the negotiator’s organizational loyalty, and members of the organizational core may develop a desire to monitor the BRP’s behavior. Thus, while the negotiator may enjoy more freedom of action than role incumbents within the organizational core, awareness of constituent suspicions about the negotiator’s motives may arouse anxiety. The anxiety may engender behavior on the part of the BRP having the primary function of restoring credibility with the constituency.

Distance carries with it yet another handicap for the negotiator. In order to represent the organization, the negotiator must be fully cognizant of and sensitive to the preferences and goals of the constituents. Because the identification of operational organizational goals is sometimes problematic even at close range [Mohr, 1973; Perrow, 1961; Simon, 1964], the negotiator who must operate at a distance from the parent organization may be doubly handicapped, as distance adds to the inherent ambiguity in goal definition. Under such circumstances the BRP may be hard pressed to accurately reflect the constituency’s purposes to the outside.

In any event, the negotiator operates at the juncture of two systems: the parent organization and the organization in contact. As both the influencer and the target of influence from both insiders and out-
siders, the negotiator is subjected to high levels of role conflict [Kahn et al., 1964]. This dynamic conflict and the negotiator’s need for resolution inevitably affect the strength of the negotiator’s organizational bond [Katz & Kahn, 1978].

The Determinants of Negotiator Distance

Boundary role conflicts may be experienced by negotiators on both sides as a result of incompatible role sending by internal and external members of the negotiators’ role sets [Kahn et al., 1964]. Two varieties of role conflict may be prevalent. Walton and McKersie [1965] distinguished between boundary conflict, in which internal and external role expectations conflict, and factional conflict, in which incompatible role prescriptions are sent from two or more elements of the negotiator’s organization. In the former category, the negotiator has a relationship with her or his counterpart that creates pressures toward avoiding the violation of the opponent’s role expectations, where such violation would lead to a deterioration in working relationships. It may be impossible, however, to avoid violation of an opponent’s role expectations without violating certain constituency-based role expectations. Role conflict in the latter category occurs entirely within the parent organization. However, in both categories, distance from the organization may accentuate the effects of role conflict and affect bargaining outcomes.

The distance of the negotiator from the constituency is a function of at least three personal and structural characteristics: organizational centrality, goal ambiguity, and goal congruence. Although these factors are not entirely independent, each adds significantly to an understanding of the notion of distance.

Member distance from an organization’s center is a complex notion, tending to be interpreted differently when different aspects of organizational involvement are used as the basis for scaling [Starbuck, 1976]. Even so, the concept of organizational centrality is less troublesome in the abstract than in the specific circumstances of labor-management bargaining. In general terms, centrality is the extent to which one’s organizational role is structured to coincide with the goals of the organization. Schein [1971] provided a picture of the psychological dimensions of an organization by drawing an analogy to the shape of a cone. The external surface portrays the organizational periphery, and the vertical inner core or central axis constitutes a reference line. At any vertical level, each organizational participant’s centrality in the organization can be conceived in terms of radial distance from that central core. In the ordinary case, the conical “shape” of the organization causes upward movement in the organization to reduce the radial distance from the organization’s center.

Application of such an abstraction on the management side of the interface is relatively straightforward. Hierarchical level in the organization provides one indicator of centrality; specialization is a second indicator. As the management negotiator’s role is positioned higher up the organizational ladder, we would expect the role incumbent’s interests to be focused more on the organization’s central function than on the function of any organizational subunit. The epitome of centrality would be the chief executive officer who personally assumes the role of negotiator. Less central would be the director for personnel or for human resources management. Even more specialized and therefore yet less central would be a labor relations staff member. Finally, the least central would be an outside consultant who is an organizational mem-
ber only in the specific context of his negotiation responsibilities. Thus, centrality can be viewed in terms of role performance and directness of the linkage between the negotiator's organizational role and the primary purposes of the organization.

Identification of the organizational centrality of the labor negotiator can be pursued in a similar manner, provided that the unit of analysis is taken to be the bargaining unit, rather than the local, regional, or international union. Distance from the bargaining unit center is normally measured in terms of hierarchical level above, rather than within, the bargaining unit. Thus centralized bargaining, wherein the labor side is represented by a negotiator provided from higher union headquarters, results in lower organizational centrality in terms of the labor bargaining unit.

Distance is also affected by the extent to which the negotiator's goals coincide with those of the organization. The negotiator's goals may diverge from those of the organization for two reasons. First, the organization's goals may not be understood by the negotiator. This goal ambiguity may be a result of conflicting messages to the negotiator from various organizational subunits or may stem from the negotiator's isolation from the parent organization. The resultant goal deviance is unintentional and is more nearly an indicator of the BRP's distance from the organization than its proximate cause.

Where the BRP does understand organizational goals, lack of goal congruence can be a second contributor to goal divergence. Negotiators may feel constrained to pursue goals that are incongruent with the primary negotiating goals of their constituencies for a number of reasons. To the extent that negotiators feel isolated from the local organization, and therefore suspect, they may engage in negotiating behaviors for the purpose of "impression management." Negotiators may seek to impress their constituencies with their strength by taking an overtly "tough" stance with opponents. Such posturing may take a ritualistic form. That is, both sides' negotiators may be able to engage in ritual conflict, with tacit understanding on the part of both that there is no hostile intent.

Negotiators who are staff specialists may desire to create conflict in order to solidify their own positions. By creating distress, negotiators can demonstrate the importance of their organizational role. This is a common means of gaining power within the organization. Power is accrued by those members who control the organization's strategic contingencies (Hickson, Hinings, Lee, Schneck, & Pennings, 1971). When labor relations becomes a critical area of organizational uncertainty, the labor relations specialist gains in power and prestige.

**A Model of Negotiator Distance And Bargaining Outcomes**

Figure 3 presents a model of the relationships that we believe underlie the determinants of psychological distance between negotiator and constituency, as well as the ultimate effects on the outcomes of collective bargaining.

Although the model presents, in schematic form, the relationships for only one side of the bargaining interface (either management or labor), it is equally applicable to either side. The central construct of the model is the psychological distance between negotiator and constituency, defined in terms of three parameters: centrality of the negotiator, goal ambiguity, and goal congruence. Working through a set of intervening variables, psychological distance suppresses both the fulfillment of opponent role expectations and the pursuit of constituent goals, in addition to directly reducing knowledge of constituent goals. Working through other intervening variables, psychological distance increases the BRP's need to provide overt and counterproductive displays of loyalty to the constituency.

In all cases the direction of the relationship between two adjacent components of the model is as indicated by the positive or negative signs adjacent to the linking arrows. For each link, the sign indicates whether an increase in the first variable will increase (+) or decrease (−) the second variable. Whether any particular variable actually increases or decreases is dependent on the net effects of all preceding variables in the model.

**Boundary Roles and Bargaining Outcomes: Some Predictions**

Although the concept of negotiator role conflict has received some attention in the bargaining literature, little emphasis has been accorded the question of whether (or how) negotiators resolve
conflicts. Our claim is that a negotiator’s resolution of role conflict influences the outcomes of negotiations, and that negotiator distance heightens role conflict and thereby affects bargaining outcomes.

**Resource Allocation Outcomes**

The allocation of resources between labor and management is determined through two bargaining subprocesses: distributive bargaining and integrative bargaining [Walton & McKersie, 1965]. Distributive bargaining involves the allocation of shares between the parties when their goals are in direct conflict. In contrast, integrative bargaining occurs when the parties to negotiations are not in fundamental disagreement. Unlike distributive bargaining, which involves fixed stakes, integrative bargaining presents an opportunity for both parties to improve their joint positions.

It is this underlying division of shares that we label “resource allocation outcomes.” The most preferred allocation of resources between the parties is achieved when the parties are able to compromise their positions on distributive issues and integrate their positions in areas of common concern. Under these circumstances the joint allocation of resources available to the parties is maximized. We refer to this continuum of resource allocation outcomes in judging the quality of joint decisions.

**System Affect Outcomes**

Employee job satisfaction, employee satisfaction with the bargaining representative, and the relationship pattern between the parties represent three important attitudes susceptible to influence through collective bargaining. Job satisfaction and constituent satisfaction are similar concepts be-
cause they represent employee attitudes about aspects of their affiliation with the negotiating coalitions. They may not be affected equally, however, because constituent satisfaction might be expected to mediate any psychological distance/job satisfaction relationships. The bargaining representative negotiates the inducements-contributions balance [March & Simon, 1958]. To the extent that the employee's basic interests are well represented, satisfaction with the bargaining representative and commensurate job satisfaction are to be expected.

The relationship-pattern concept refers to the reciprocal attitude structure, which is a product of interaction between labor and management. Walton and McKersie [1965] identify five different relationship patterns: conflict, containment-aggression, accommodation, cooperation, and collusion. Underlying these patterns are several continuous attitudinal dimensions, including the motivational orientations of the parties, beliefs of each party about the legitimacy of the other, and trust and friendliness. Implicit in the relationship-pattern construct is the notion that a cooperative pattern is more desirable than a conflict pattern for the viability of the relationship.

These bargaining outcomes — i.e., the quality of joint decisions, job satisfaction, constituent satisfaction, and relationship patterns — reflect the scope of our interest. We would, in most situations, expect these outcomes to co-vary, although only the relationship pattern might be considered a joint outcome, in an absolute sense. Covariance between constituent satisfaction and job satisfaction will result, in part, from the former's previously noted effect on the latter.

Where the quality of joint decisions is low, constituent satisfaction is expected to be similarly low, and the relationship pattern will tend toward conflict. Conversely, in cases where the quality of joint decisions is high, we should also find high constituent satisfaction as well as a reasonably cooperative relationship pattern.

Theoretical Relationships

In what ways will the bargaining outcomes identified above co-vary with the distance of negotiators from their constituent organizations? The answer can be summarized in the form of a proposition: All other things being equal, as the psychological distance of labor and management negotiators from their respective constituencies increases, the quality of joint decisions will decrease, constituent satisfaction and job satisfaction will decrease, and the labor-management relationship pattern will be increasingly marked by conflict. That is, bargaining outcomes should vary directly with the psychological closeness of both the labor and management negotiators to their respective constituencies. When one of the negotiators is distant, while the other is close, bargaining outcomes should fall somewhere in between the outcomes attained when both are either close or distant. The causal processes that underlie these predictions are discussed below.

In general, the predictions are based on expectations about the effects of distance on the interpersonal orientation of the negotiators and on their effectiveness in bargaining. By interpersonal orientation we mean the responsiveness of the negotiators to the interpersonal aspects of their relationship with the other party [Rubin & Brown, 1975]. Walton and McKersie [1965, p. 284] discuss the typical interpersonal orientation expected from negotiators:

A negotiator is often expected to behave with understanding and to act in a way that accommodates the needs of his opponent. This role usually carries with it a set of prescriptions for the role occupant, e.g., the negotiator should not behave in a way that undermines the long-run interest of the relationship.

The ability of negotiators to comply with these expectations is seriously impaired as the distance from their constituencies increases. Negotiators at extreme distances (e.g., external management consultants and international union officers) can expect little future interaction with their counterparts because of the transitory nature of their involvement, and thus are less likely to behave in a cooperative manner [Marlowe, Gergen, & Doob, 1966; Rubin & Brown, 1975; Slusher, Roering, & Rose, 1974]. These same individuals are also less likely to have shared past experiences with their opponent and, therefore, are likely to behave less cooperatively [Rubin & Brown, 1975].

While the impact of distance on interpersonal orientation involves a breakdown in interparty role expectations, it also reduces the effectiveness of the negotiator in intraorganizational bargaining. Decreasing familiarity with and commitment to con-
constituent goals, which come with increasing distance of the boundary role person, make it increasingly likely that the negotiator will (either knowingly or unknowingly) modify or ignore either or both the behavioral and substantive expectations of the organization [Walton & McKersie, 1965]. The likely consequences of a negotiator’s deviating from his or her organization’s behavioral and substantive expectations are lower quality decisions and lower satisfaction.

The term “accountability” is used in the bargaining literature to convey several notions, often without any effort to make a clear distinction among them. In some cases, the term indicates the sense of a negotiator’s responsibility to his or her constituency. On other occasions the term pertains to authority and surveillance controls imposed by the constituency on the negotiator. Our use of accountability in the model coincides with the latter definition. A negotiator’s tendency to modify or ignore internal expectations, as psychological distance increases, would be easily controllable were it not for the fact that negotiator accountability tends to decrease with distance. To restore accountability, a constituency is likely to resort to sanctions that are dysfunctional for preferred bargaining outcomes. Rubin and Brown [1975, p. 50] comment:

In collective bargaining, such sanctions include removal of the negotiator from his role (summarily or by defeat in a subsequent election), reduced constituency support (through wildcat strikes, the emergence of uncontrollable factions, or other signs of discontent), and damage to the bargainer’s reputation.

In public-sector bargaining, intraorganizational and community forms of multilateralism [Juris & Feuille, 1973; Levine, Perry, & DeMarco, 1977] tend to exacerbate the distance problem and further detract from achieving mutually satisfactory outcomes. Department heads or union factions interested in influencing the course of negotiations are likely to have greater ability to undercut the efforts of a negotiator who already may be the subject of internal suspicion. Community interest groups are likewise in a better position to alter the preferences of the negotiator or create uncertainties about the goals that are being pursued.

Frey and Adams’s [1972] laboratory simulation supports our predictions. When distrusted negotiators were faced by an exploitative opponent, they tended to resist the demands of their constituencies while acquiescing to their opponent. When trusted negotiators were confronted by a cooperative opponent they were more conciliatory toward their constituency and were better able to resist their opponent. These results suggest that low joint distance (the trusted-cooperative condition) will be associated with more desirable bargaining outcomes and high joint distance (the distrusted-exploitative condition) will be associated with less desirable bargaining outcomes.

Summary and Conclusions

We have developed a model of the politics of organizational boundary roles in collective bargaining. We have explored the relationships between the distance of boundary role persons from their constituent organizations and bargaining outcomes. We have argued that the distance of boundary role persons from their constituent organizations is a major influence on bargaining outcomes. We considered both resource allocation outcomes and system affect outcomes. Confirmation of our propositions would raise interesting questions about staffing the labor relations function because some of the predictions of the model run counter to the conventional wisdom in the private sector [Turner et al., 1977] and current trends in the public sector [Burton, 1972]. In any event, the model poses important practical and theoretical questions worthy of future study.

REFERENCES


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