Similar attitudes surround the idea of power, a concept that is central in political thinking. In her last interview, only days before she was assassinated in December 2007, Benazir Bhutto was asked if she liked power. Her response captured the mixed feelings many of us harbor: "Power has made me suffer too much. In reality I’m ambivalent about it. It interests me because it makes it possible to change things. But it's left me with a bitter taste" (Lagarde, 2008, p. 13).

A jaundiced view of politics constitutes a serious threat to individual and organizational effectiveness. Viewed from the political frame, politics is the realistic process of making decisions and allocating resources in a context of scarcity and divergent interests. This view puts politics at the heart of decision making.

We introduce the elements of the political frame in Chapter Nine. We begin by examining dynamics lurking in the background of the tragic loss of the space shuttles Columbia and Challenger. We also lay out the perspective's key assumptions and discuss basic issues of power, conflict, and ethics.

In Chapter Ten, we look at the constructive side of politics. The chapter is organized around basic skills of the effective organizational politician: setting agendas, mapping the political terrain, networking, building coalitions, and negotiating. We also offer four principles of moral judgment to guide in dealing with ethically slippery political issues.

Chapter Eleven moves from the individual to the organizational level. In the chapter, we look at organizations as both arenas for political contests and active political players or actors. As arenas, organizations have an important duty to shape the rules of the game. As players or actors, organizations are powerful tools for achieving the agenda of whoever controls them. We close with a discussion of the relative power of organizations and society. Will giant corporations take over the world? Or will other institutions channel and constrain their actions?

Flash back to 1986. After a series of delays, \textit{Challenger} was set to launch on January 28. At sunrise, it was clear but very cold in Cape Canaveral, Florida. The weather was more like New Hampshire, where Christa McAuliffe was a high school teacher. Curtains of ice greeted ground crews as they inspected the shuttle. The temperature had plunged overnight to a record low of 24 degrees Fahrenheit (~4 degrees Celsius). The ice team removed as much as they could. Temperatures gradually warmed, but it was still brisk at 8:30 AM. \textit{Challenger}'s crew of seven astronauts noted the ice as they climbed into the capsule. As McAuliffe, the first teacher to venture into space, entered the ship, a technician offered her an apple. She beamed and asked him to save it until she returned. At 11:38 AM, \textit{Challenger} lifted off. A minute later, there was a massive explosion in the booster rockets. Millions watched television screens in horror as the shuttle and its crew were destroyed.

On the eve of the launch, an emergency teleconference had been called between NASA and the Morton Thiokol Corporation, the contractor for the shuttle's solid-fuel rocket motor. During the teleconference, Thiokol engineers pleaded with superiors and NASA to delay the launch. They feared cold temperatures would cause a failure in synthetic rubber O-rings sealing the rocket motor's joints. If the rings failed, the motor could blow up. The problem was simple and familiar: rubber loses elasticity at cold temperatures. Freeze a rubber ball and it won't bounce; freeze an O-ring and it might not seal. Engineers recommended strongly that NASA wait for warmer weather. They tried to produce a persuasive engineering rationale, but their report was hastily thrown together, and the data seemed equivocal (Vaughan, 1995). Meanwhile, Thiokol and NASA both faced strong pressure to get the shuttle in the air:

Thiokol had gained the lucrative sole source contract for the solid rocket boosters thirteen years earlier, during a bitterly disputed award process. It was characterized by some veteran observers as a low point in squabbling political intrigue. At the time of the award, a relatively small Thiokol Chemical Company in Brigham City, Utah, had considerable political clout. Both the newly appointed chairman of the Senate Aeronautics and Space Science Committee, Democratic Senator Frank Moss, and the new NASA administrator, Dr. James Fletcher, were insiders in the tightly knit Utah political hierarchy. By summer 1985, however, Thiokol's monopoly was under attack.

and the corporation's executives were reluctant to risk their billion-dollar contract by halting shuttle flight operations long enough to correct flaws in the booster joint design [McConnell, 1987, p. 7].

Meanwhile, NASA managers were experiencing their own political pressures. As part of the effort to build congressional support for the space program, NASA had promised that the shuttle would eventually pay for itself in cargo fees, like a boxcar in space. Projections of profitability were based on an ambitious plan: twelve flights in 1984, fourteen in 1985, and seventeen in 1986. NASA had fallen well behind schedule—only five launches in 1984 and eight in 1985. The promise of "routine access to space" and self-supporting flights looked more and more dubious. With every flight costing taxpayers about $100 million, NASA needed a lot of cash from Congress, but prospects were not bright. NASA's credibility was eroding as the U.S. budget deficit soared.

That was the highly charged context in which Thiokol's engineers recommended canceling the next morning's launch. The response from NASA officials was swift and pointed. One NASA manager said he was "appalled" at the proposal, and another said, "My God, Thiokol, when do you want me to launch? Next April?" (McConnell, 1987, p. 196). Senior managers at Thiokol huddled and decided, against the advice of engineers, to recommend the launch. NASA accepted the recommendation and launched Flight 51-L the next morning. The O-rings failed almost immediately, and the flight was destroyed (Bell and Esch, 1987; Jensen, 1995; McConnell, 1987; Marx, Stubari, Taub, and Cavanaugh, 1987; Vaughan, 1990, 1995).

It is disturbing to see political agendas corrupting technical decisions, particularly when lives are at stake. We might be tempted to explain \textit{Challenger} by blaming individual selfishness and questionable motives. But such explanations are little help in understanding what really happened or avoiding a future catastrophe. As we saw in Chapter Two's friendly-fire case (where U.S. fighter jets mistakenly shot down two of their own helicopters), individual errors typically occur downstream from powerful forces channeling decision makers over a precipice no one sees until too late. With \textit{Columbia} and \textit{Challenger}, key decision makers were experienced, highly trained, and intelligent. If we tried to get better people, where would we find them? Even if we could, how could we ensure that they too would not become ensnared by parochial interests and political gaming? The \textit{Columbia} investigating board recognized this reality, concluding, "NASA's
problems cannot be solved simply by retirements, resignations, or transferring personnel" (Columbia Accident Investigation Board, 2003, p. 195).

Both Columbia and Challenger were extraordinary tragedies, but they illustrate political dynamics that are everyday features of organizational life. The political frame does not blame politics on individual characteristics such as selfishness, myopia, or incompetence. Instead, it proposes that interdependence, divergent interests, scarcity, and power relations inevitably spawn political activity. It is naive and romantic to hope organizational politics can be eliminated, regardless of individual players. Managers can, however, learn to acknowledge, understand, and manage political dynamics, rather than shy away from them. In government, politics is a way of life rather than dirty pool. Chris Matthews calls it hardball: "Hardball is clean, aggressive Machiavellian politics. It is the discipline of gaining and holding power, useful to any profession or undertaking, but practiced most openly and unashamedly in the world of public affairs" (1999, p. 13).

This chapter seeks to explain why political processes are universal, why they won't go away, and how they can be handled adroitly. We describe the political frame's basic assumptions and explain how they work. Next, we highlight organizations as freewheeling coalitions rather than formal hierarchies. Coalitions are tools for exercising power, and we contrast power with authority and highlight tensions between authorities (who try to keep things under control) and partisans (who try to influence a system to get what they want). We also delineate multiple sources of power. Since conflict is normal among members of a coalition, we underscore the role of conflict in organizations. Finally, we discuss an issue at the heart of organizational politics: Do political dynamics inevitably undermine principles and ethics?

POLITICAL ASSUMPTIONS

The political frame views organizations as rolling arenas hosting ongoing contests of individual and group interests. Five propositions summarize the perspective:

1. Organizations are coalitions of assorted individuals and interest groups.
2. Coalition members have enduring differences in values, beliefs, information, interests, and perceptions of reality.
3. Most important decisions involve allocating scarce resources—who gets what.
4. Scarce resources and enduring differences put conflict at the center of day-to-day dynamics and make power the most important asset.
5. Goals and decisions emerge from bargaining and negotiation among competing stakeholders jockeying for their own interests.

Political Propositions and the Challenger

All five propositions of the political frame came into play in the Challenger incident:

Organizations are coalitions. NASA did not run the space shuttle program in isolation. The agency was part of a complex coalition of contractors, Congress, the White House, the military, the media—even the American public. Consider, for example, why Christa McAuliffe was aboard. Her expertise as a teacher was not technically critical to the mission. But the American public was bored with seeing white male pilots in space. Human interest was good for NASA and Congress; it built public support for the space program. McAuliffe's participation was a media magnet because it made for a great human interest story. Symbolically, Christa McAuliffe represented all Americans. Everyone flew with her.

Coalition members have enduring differences. NASA's hunger for funding competed with the public's interest in lower taxes. Astronauts' concerns about safety were at odds with pressures on NASA and its contractors to maintain an ambitious flight schedule.

Important decisions involve allocating scarce resources. Time and money were both in short supply. Delay carried a high price—not just dollars, but also further erosion of support from key constituents. On the eve of the Challenger launch, key officials at NASA and Morton Thiokol struggled to balance these conflicting pressures. Everyone from President Ronald Reagan to the average citizen was clamoring for the first teacher to fly in space. No one wanted to tell the audience the show was off.

Scarce resources and enduring differences make conflict central and power the most important asset. The teleconference on the eve of the launch began as a debate between the contractor and NASA. As sole customer, NASA was in
the driver’s seat. When managers at Morton Thiokol sensed NASA’s level of disappointment and frustration, the scene shifted to a tense standoff between engineers and managers. Managers relied on their authority to override the engineers’ concerns and recommended the launch.

Goals and decisions emerge from bargaining, negotiation, and jockeying for position among competing stakeholders. Political bargaining and powerful allies had propelled Morton Thiokol into the rocket motor business. Thiokol’s engineers had been attempting to focus management’s attention on the booster joint problem for many months. But management feared that acknowledging a problem, in addition to costing time and money, would erode the company's credibility. A large and profitable contract was at stake.

Implications of the Political Propositions

The assumptions of the political frame also explain why organizations are inevitably political. A coalition forms because of interconnections among its members; they need one another, even though their interests may only partly overlap. The assumption of enduring differences implies that political activity is more visible and dominant under conditions of diversity than of homogeneity. Agreement and harmony are easier to achieve when everyone shares similar values, beliefs, and cultural ways.

The concept of scarce resources suggests that politics will be more salient and intense in difficult times. Schools and colleges, for example, have lived through alternating feast and famine in response to peaks and valleys in economic and demographic trends. When money and students are plentiful (as they were in the 1960s and again in the 1990s), administrators spend time designing new buildings and initiating innovative programs. Work is fun when you're delivering good news and constituents applaud. Conversely, when resources dry up, you may have to shutter buildings, close programs, and lay off staff. Conflict mushrooms, and administrators often succumb to political forces they struggle to understand and control.

Differences and scarce resources make power a key resource. Power in organizations is basically the capacity to make things happen. Pfeffer defines power as “the potential ability to influence behavior, to change the course of events, to overcome resistance, and to get people to do things they would not otherwise do” (1992, p. 30). Social scientists often emphasize a tight linkage between power and dependency: if A has something B wants, A has leverage. In much of organizational life, individuals and groups are interdependent; they need things from one another, and power relationships are multidirectional. From the view of the political frame, power is a “daily mechanism of our social existence” (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977, p. 32).

The final proposition of the political frame emphasizes that goals are not set by edict at the top but evolve through an ongoing process of negotiation and bargaining. Few organizations have a unitary apex. Who, for example, is at the head of a public company? The CEO? But the CEO reports to the board. The board is elected by and accountable to the shareholders. And the shareholders are typically a large and scattered group of absentee owners with little time, interest, or capacity to influence the organization in which each has a sliver of ownership. If a corporate raider or hedge fund acquires a major ownership stake, the stage is set for a battle over control of the company.

The dynamic of multiple constituents jockeying for influence is especially apparent in the public sector. Consider a commitment China made in 2001 to gain membership in the World Trade Organization. The Chinese government promised to get serious about protecting intellectual property, ensuring that products carrying brands such as Coca-Cola, Microsoft, Sony, and Rolex were authentic. The central government passed laws, threw the book at the occasional unlucky offender, clustered in the media, and put pressure on local governments. Yet years later, name-brand knockoffs and pirated music continued to be sold all over China. In late 2007, the Shanghai street price for the latest Hollywood movies on DVD was about sixty cents, and tourists in Beijing encountered countless vendors offering amazing bargains on Rolex watches (Powell, 2007). In response to numerous complaints from abroad, the government announced still another crackdown, promised stiffer fines for violators, and staged a nationwide burn-in at which 42 million pirated items were consigned to bonfires (Coonan, 2007).

Why have the anti-piracy efforts had so little impact? The Chinese government is far from monolithic and is only one of many players in a complex power game. Newly affluent Chinese consumers want foreign brands. Lots of large and small Chinese businesses know, for example, that a homemade carbonated fluid can fetch a better price if it carries an American brand name. The problem has been so widespread that Coca-Cola's Chinese affiliate has found itself not only building factories but also chasing pirates who slap Coke labels on bottles in delivery trucks en route to retail outlets.
Stopping piracy has run into a range of obstacles. Pirates are often local businesses with plenty of guanxi (connections) who generously share the loot with local government and police officials. As one New York Times reporter discovered when he was imprisoned for several hours in a toy factory, “Factory bosses can overrule the police, and Chinese government officials are not as powerful as you might suspect” (Barboza, 2007, p. 3). Moreover, the concept of intellectual property rights is new to many Chinese. They find it hard to see the merit of punishing a hard-working Chinese entrepreneur to protect a big foreign corporation. In short, multiple power centers and continuing divisions have seriously limited senior officials’ ability to translate intention into action.

ORGANIZATIONS AS COALITIONS

Academics and managers alike have assumed that organizations have, or ought to have, clear and consistent goals set at the apex of authority. In a business, the owners or top managers set goals such as growth and profitability. Goals in a government agency are presumably set by the legislature and elected executives. The political frame challenges such views. Cyert and March articulate the difference between structural and political views of goals:

To what extent is it arbitrary, in conventional accounting, that we call wage payments “costs” and dividend payments “profit” rather than the other way around? Why is it that in our quasi-genetic moments we are inclined to say that in the beginning there was a manager, and he recruited workers and capital? . . . The emphasis on the asymmetry has seriously confused the understanding of organizational goals. The confusion arises because ultimately it makes only slightly more sense to say that the goal of a business enterprise is to maximize profit than to say that its goal is to maximize the salary of Sam Smith, assistant to the janitor [1963, p. 30].

Cyert and March are saying something like this: Sam Smith, the assistant janitor; Jim Ford, the foreman; and Celeste Cohen-Peters, the company president are all members of a grand coalition, Cohen-Peters Enterprises. All make demands on resources and bargain to get as much of what they value as possible. Cohen-Peters has more authority than Jones or Ford and, in case of disagreement, she will often win—but not always. Her influence depends on how much power she mobilizes in comparison with that of Smith, Ford, and other members of the coalition. Xerox had a close brush with bankruptcy in 2001 under a CEO who had come from the outside and never mastered the politics at the top of the organization. The firm was adrift, and the captain had lost control of his ship. His successor, Anne Mulcahy, was a canny insider who built the relationships and alliances she needed to get Xerox back on course.

If political pressures on goals are visible in the private sector, they are blatant in the public arena. As in the Challenger incident, public agencies operate amid a welter of constituencies, each making demands and trying to get its way. The result is a confusing multiplicity of goals, many in conflict. Consider Gazprom, Russia’s biggest company and the world’s largest producer of natural gas. For a time in 2006, it ranked third in the world in market capitalization, behind only Exxon and General Electric. Gazprom supplies most of the natural gas in Eastern Europe and 25 percent or more in France, Germany, and Italy. It began as a state ministry under Mikhail Gorbachev, became a public stock company under Boris Yeltsin, and then turned semi-public under Vladimir Putin, with the Russian government the majority stockholder.

Many observers felt that Gazprom functioned as an extension of government policy. Prices for gas exports seemed to correlate with how friendly a government was to Moscow. “If people take us for the state, that doesn’t make us unhappy,” said Sergei Koupriyanov, a company spokesman. “We identify with the state” (Pasquier, 2007, p. 43). Russian President Vladimir Putin returned the sentiment. Gazprom produced a quarter of Russia’s government revenues, and Putin saw hydrocarbons substituting for the Red Army as a lever to project Russian power. At the same time, Russian consumers got their gas at about 20 percent of market price. When the company tried for a domestic price increase in 2006, it was blocked by a government that was thinking ahead to the next presidential election. Was this giant in business to benefit customers, management, stockholders, the Kremlin, or Russian citizens? All of the above and more, because all were participants in the grand and messy Gazprom coalition.
GREATEST HITS FROM ORGANIZATION STUDIES

Hit Number 2: Richard M. Cyert and James G. March, 

Coming in at number two on the scholars’ lists of greatest hits is a forty-year-old book by an economist, Richard Cyert, and a political scientist, James G. March. Cyert and March defined their basic purpose as developing a predictive theory of organizational decision making rooted in a realistic understanding of how decisions actually get made. They rejected as unrealistic the traditional economic view of a firm as a unitary entity (a corporate “person”) with a singular goal of maximizing profits. Cyert and March chose instead to view organizations as coalitions made up of individuals and subcoalitions. This view implied a central idea of the political frame: goals emerge out of a bargaining process among coalition members. Cyert and March also insisted that “side payments” are critical, since preferences are only partly compatible and decisions rarely satisfy everyone. A coalition can survive only if it offers sufficient inducements to keep essential members on board. This is not easy, because resources—money, time, information, and decision-making capacity—are limited.

In analyzing decision making, Cyert and March developed four “relational concepts,” implicit rules that firms use to make decisions more manageable:

1. Quasi-resolution of conflict. Instead of resolving conflict, organizations break problems into pieces and farm pieces out to different units. Units make locally rational decisions (for example, marketers do what they think is best for marketing). Decisions are never consistent but need only be good enough to keep the coalition functioning.

2. Uncertainty avoidance. Organizations employ a range of simplifying mechanisms—such as standard operating procedures, traditions, and contracts—that enable them to act as if the environment is clearer than it is.


4. Organizational learning. Over time, organizations evolve their goals and aspiration levels, altering what they attend to and what they ignore, and changing search rules.

POWER AND DECISION MAKING

At every level in organizations, alliances form because members have interests in common and believe they can do more together than apart. To accomplish their aims, they need power. Power can be viewed from multiple perspectives. Structural theorists typically emphasize authority, the legitimate prerogative to make binding decisions. In this view, managers make rational decisions (optimal and consistent with purpose); monitor actions to ensure decisions are implemented; and calculate how well subordinates carry out directives. In contrast, human resource theorists place less emphasis on power and more on empowerment (Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Block, 1987). More than structuralists, they emphasize limits of authority and tend to focus on influence that enhances mutuality and collaboration. The implicit hope is that participation, openness, and collaboration substitute for power.

The political frame views authority as only one among many forms of power. It recognizes the importance of individual (and group) needs but emphasizes that scarce resources and incompatible preferences cause needs to collide. The political issue is how competing groups articulate preferences and mobilize power to get what they want. Power, in this view, is not evil: “We have to stop describing power always in negative terms; as if it excludes, it represents. In fact, power produces; it produces reality” (Fenno, 1985, p. 12).

 Authorities and Partisans

Ganson (1968) describes the relationship between two antagonists—partisans and authorities—that are often central to the politics of both organizations and society. By virtue of their position, authorities are entitled to make decisions binding on their subordinates. Any member of the coalition who wants to exert bottom-up pressure is a potential partisan.
describes the relationship in this way: "Authorities are the recipients or targets of influence, and the agents or initiators of social control. Potential partisans have the opposite roles—as agents or initiators of influence, and targets or recipients of social control" (p. 76).

In a family, parents function as authorities and children as partisans. Parents make binding decisions about bedtime, television viewing, or which child uses a particular toy. Parents initiate social control, and children are the recipients of parental decisions. Children in turn try to influence the decision makers. They argue for a later bedtime or point out the injustice of giving one child something another wants. They try to split authorities by lobbying one parent after the other has refused. They may form a coalition (with siblings, grandparents, and so on) in an attempt to strengthen their bargaining position.

Authority is essential to anyone in a formal position because social control depends on it. Officeholders can exert control only so long as partisans respect or fear them enough that their authority or power remains intact. If partisans are convinced that existing authorities are too evil or incompetent to continue, they will risk trying to wrest control—unless they regard the authorities as too formidable. Conversely, if partisans trust authority, they will accept and support it in the event of an attack (Gamson, 1968; Baldridge, 1971).

If partisan opposition becomes too powerful, authority systems may collapse. The process can be very swift, as events in Eastern Europe and China in 1989 illustrated. Established regimes had lost legitimacy years earlier but held on through coercion and control of access to decision making. When massive demonstrations erupted, authorities faced an unnerving choice: activate the police and army in the hope of preserving power or watch their authority fade away. Authorities in China and Romania chose the first course. It led to bloodshed in both cases, but only the Chinese were able to quash their opposition. In Eastern Europe, authorities' attempts to quell dissent with force were futile, and their legitimacy evaporated as swiftly as water in a desert.

The period of evaporation is typically hasty but always hazardous. The question is whether new authority can reconstitute itself quickly enough to avoid chaos. Authorities and partisans both have reason to fear a specter such as Lebanon encountered in the 1980s and again in the early 2000s; Bosnia and Liberia in the 1990s, Somalia since 1991, and Iraq in the aftermath of U.S. intervention. All are dismal examples of chronic turmoil and misery, with no authority strong enough to bring partisan strife under control.

Sources of Power
Authority is far from the only source of power—partisans have other sources they can draw upon. A number of social scientists (Baldrige, 1971; French and Raven, 1959; Kanter, 1977; Pfeffer, 1981, 1992; Russ, 1994) have tried to identify the various wellsprings of power. The full list includes

- **Position power (authority).** Positions confer certain levels of legitimate authority. Professors assign grades, judges settle disputes. Positions also place incumbents in more or less powerful locations in communications and power networks. It helps as much to be in the right unit as to hold the right job. A lofty title in a backwater department may not mean much, but junior members of a powerful unit may have substantial clout (Pfeffer, 1992).

- **Control of rewards.** The ability to deliver jobs, money, political support, or other rewards brings power. There are many differences between Chicago Mayor Richard Daley and Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who heads the Mahdi army, but both cement their power base by delivering services and jobs to loyal supporters (Mihalopoulos and Kimberly, 2006; Rubin, 2007).

- **Coercive power.** Coercive power rests on the ability to constrain, block, interfere, or punish. A union's ability to walk out, students' capacity to sit in, and an army's ability to clamp down exemplify coercive power. A chilling example is the rise of suicide attacks in the last quarter-century. "Suicide attacks amount to just 3 percent of all terrorist incidents from 1980 to 2003, but account for 48 percent of all fatalities, making the average suicide attack twelve times deadlier than other forms of terrorism—even if the immense losses of September 11 are not counted" (Pape, 2006, p. 4).

- **Information and expertise.** Power flows to those with the information and know-how to solve important problems. It flows to marketing experts in consumer products industries, to the faculty in elite universities, and to political consultants who help politicians get elected.

- **Reputation.** Reputation builds on expertise. In almost every area of human performance, people develop track records based on their prior accomplishments. Opportunities and influence flow to people with strong reputations, like the Hollywood superstars whose presence in a new film sells tickets.

- **Personal power.** Individuals who are attractive and socially adept—because of charisma, energy, stamina, political smarts, gift of gab, vision, or some
other characteristic—are imbued with power independent of other sources. French and Raven (1959) used the term referent power to describe influence that comes when people like you or want to be like you. John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan expanded their influence because they brought to the presidency levels of charm, humor, and ease that Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush lacked.

- **Alliances and networks.** Getting things done in an organization involves working through a complex network of individuals and groups. Friends and allies make things a lot easier. Kotter (1982) found that a key difference between more and less successful senior managers was attentiveness to building and cultivating ties with friends and allies. Managers who spent too little time building networks had much more difficulty getting things done.

- **Access and control of agendas.** A by-product of networks and alliances is access to decision arenas. Organizations and political systems typically give some groups more access than others. When decisions are made, the interests of those with "a seat at the table" are well represented, while the concerns of absentees are often distorted or ignored (Lukes, 1974; Brown, 1986).

- **Framing: control of meaning and symbols.** "Establishing the framework within which issues will be viewed and decided is often tantamount to determining the result" (Pfeffer, 1992, p. 203). Elites and opinion leaders often have substantial ability to shape meaning and articulate myths that express identity, beliefs, and values. Viewed positively, this fosters meaning and hope. Viewed cynically, elites can convince others to accept and support things not in their best interests (Brown, 1986; Frost, 1985; Lakoff, 2004). Lakoff argued that Republican electoral success in 2000 and 2004 owed much to skill in framing issues—recasting, for example, the "estate tax" (which sounds like a tax on the rich) into the "death tax" (which sounds like adding insult to injury).

Partisans' multiple sources of power constrain authorities' capacity to make binding decisions. Officeholders who rely solely on position power generate resistance and get outflanked, outmaneuvered, or overrun by others more versatile in exercising other forms of power. Kotter (1985) argues that managerial chieftains need a built-in "power gap" because position power is rarely enough to get the job done. Expertise, rewards, coercion, allies, access, reputation, framing, and personal power help close the gap.

Power can be very volatile, rising and falling with changes in circumstances. An organization that sets new profit records each year is rarely besieged by complaints and demands for change. As many company presidents have learned, however, the first bad quarter triggers a stream of calls and letters from board members, stockholders, and financial analysts. In the boom of the late 1990s, "everyone" was getting rich in the stock market, and charismatic CEOs such as Jack Welch of General Electric and Jean-Marie Messier of France's Vivendi became popular heroes. But when the economy, the market, and the image of business crashed in the first years of the new century, so did these heroic images. In 2002, Welch found himself deeply embarrassed by public revelation of the generous postretirement payouts his old company was bestowing on him. In the same year, Messier was booted out by board members dissatisfied with the company's stock price and his arrogant "American" leadership style.

Clark Kerr once remarked ruefully that his primary tasks as chancellor of the University of California at Berkeley seemed to be providing "sex for the students, parking for the faculty, and football for the alumni." The remark was half facetious but reflects an important grain of truth: a president's power lies particularly in zones of indifference—areas only a few people care much about. The zone of indifference can expand or contract markedly, depending on how an organization is performing in the eyes of its major constituents. In the late 1960s, many college presidents lost their jobs because they were blamed for student unrest. Among them was Kerr, who remarked that he left the job just as he entered it, "fired with enthusiasm." Managers need to track the shifting boundaries of zones of indifference so they do not blunder into decisions that seem safe but stir up unanticipated firestorms of criticism and resistance.

**Distribution of Power: Overbounded and Underbounded Systems**

Organizations and societies differ markedly in how power is distributed. Alderfer (1979) and Brown (1983) distinguish between overbounded and underbounded systems. In an overbounded system, power is highly concentrated and everything is highly regulated. In an underbounded system, power is diffuse and the system is very loosely controlled. An overbounded system regulates politics with a firm hand; an underbounded system openly encourages conflict and power games.

If power is highly regulated, political activity is often forced under wraps. Before the emergence of Mikhail Gorbachev and glasnost ("openness") in the
organization may very well be an apathetic, uncreative, stagnant, inflexible, and unresponsive organization. Conflict challenges the status quo [and] stimulates interest and curiosity. It is the root of personal and social change, creativity, and innovation. Conflict encourages new ideas and approaches to problems, stimulating innovation” (Heffron, 1989, p. 185).

An organization can experience too much or too little conflict (Brown, 1983; Heffron, 1989; John, 1995). Intervention may be needed to tamp down or stoke up the intensity, depending on the situation (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002). Even more important than the amount of conflict is how it is managed. Badly managed conflict leads to the infighting and destructive power struggle revealed in the Challenger and Columbia cases. But well-handled conflict can stimulate creativity and innovation that make an organization a livelier, more adaptive, and more effective place (Kotter, 1985).

Conflict is particularly likely to occur at boundaries, or interfaces, between groups and units. Horizontal conflict occurs in the boundary between departments or divisions. Vertical conflict occurs at the border between levels. Cultural conflict crops up between groups with differing values, traditions, beliefs, and lifestyles. Cultural quarrels in the larger society often seep into the workplace, generating tension around gender, ethnic, racial, and other differences. But organizations also house their own value disputes. The culture of management is different from that of frontline employees. Workers who move up the ladder sometimes struggle with elusive adjustments required by their new role.

The management challenge is to recognize and manage interface conflict. Like other forms, it can be productive or debilitating. One of the most important tasks of unit managers or union representatives is to be a persuasive advocate for their group on a political field with many players representing competing interests. They need negotiation skills to develop alliances and cement deals that enable their group to move forward with “without physical or psychological bloodshed and with wisdom as grace” (Peck, 1998, p. 71).

**Moral Mazes: The Politics of Getting Ahead**

Does a world of power, self-interest, conflict, and political games inevitably develop into a dog-eat-dog jungle in which the strong devour the weak? Is an unregulated organization invariably a nasty, brutish place where values and
ethics are irrelevant? The corporate ethics scandals of recent years reinforced a recurrent suspicion that the morals of the marketplace amount to no morals at all.

Jackall (1988) views the corporation as a world of cabals and alliances, dominance and submission, conflict and self-interest, and "moral mazes." He suggests that "wise and ambitious managers resist the lulling platitudes of unity, though they invoke them with fervor, and look for the inevitable clash of interests beneath the bouncy, cheerful surface of corporate life" (p. 37). Moving up the ladder inevitably involves competition for the scarce resource of status. The favored myth is that free and fair competition ensures that better performers will win, at least in the long run.

But assessing performance in a managerial job is fraught with ambiguity. There are multiple criteria, some of which can be assessed only through subjective judgment (particularly by the boss and other superiors). It is often hard to separate individual performance from group performance or from a host of exogenous factors. It may also make a big difference who is doing the judging. When bright, creative energy traders at Enron developed clever techniques with names like "Get Shorty" and "Fat Boy" to exploit a crisis in California's electricity market in 2001, did they deserve commendation for boosting the bottom line? Or jail time? Did Thiokol engineers who fought to stop the launch of Challenger deserve a high grade for persistence and integrity, or a low grade because they failed to persuade their bosses? When some of those same engineers went public with their criticism, were they demonstrating courage or disloyalty? Whistleblowers are regularly lauded by the press, yet pilloried or banished by employers (Alford, 2001). This is exemplified by Time magazine's 2002 Person of the Year award, given to three women who blew the whistle on their employers: Enron, WorldCom, and the FBI. By the time they received the award, all had moved on from workplaces that viewed them more as traitors than as exemplars of courage and integrity.

Managers frequently learn that getting ahead is a matter of personal "credibility," which comes from doing what is socially and politically correct. Definitions of political correctness reflect tacit forms of power deeply embedded in organizational patterns and structure (Frost, 1986). Because getting ahead and making it to the top dominate the attention of many managers (Dalton, 1959; Jackall, 1988; Ritti and Funkhouser, 1982), both organizations and individuals need to develop constructive and positive ways to engage in the political game. The question is not whether organizations will have politics but rather what kind of politics they will have. Jackall's view is bleak:

Bureaucratic world, one's success, one's sign of election, no longer depends on an inscrutable God, but on the capriciousness of one's superiors and the market; and one achieves economic salvation to the extent that one pleases and submits to new gods, that is, one's bosses and the exigencies of an impersonal market [1988, pp. 191–192].

This is not a pretty picture, but it is often accurate. Productive politics is a possible alternative although hard to achieve. In the next chapter, we explore ways that a manager can become a constructive politician.

**SUMMARY**

The traditional view sees organizations as created and controlled by legitimate authorities who set goals, design structure, hire and manage employees, and ensure pursuit of the right objectives. The political view frames a different world: Organizations are coalitions composed of individuals and groups with enduring differences who live in a world of scarce resources. That puts power and conflict at the center of organizational decision making.

Authorities have position power, but they must vie with many other contenders for other forms of leverage. Contenders bring their own beliefs, values, and interests. They seek access to various forms of power and compete for their share of scarce resources in a finite organizational pie.

From a political perspective, goals, structure, and policies emerge from an ongoing process of bargaining and negotiation among major interest groups. Sometimes legitimate authorities are the dominant members of the coalition, as is often true in small, owner-managed organizations. But large corporations are often controlled by senior management rather than by stockholders or the board of directors. Government agencies may be controlled more by the
permanent civil servants than by the political leaders at the top. The dominant group in a school district may be the teachers' union instead of the school board or the superintendent. In such cases, rationalists see the wrong people setting the agenda. But the political view suggests that exercising power is a natural part of ongoing contests. Those who get and use power to their advantage will be winners.

There is no guarantee that those who gain power will use it wisely or justly. But power and politics are not inevitably demeaning and destructive. Constructive politics is a possibility—indeed, a necessary option if we are to create institutions and societies that are both just and efficient.