

# ***Mean Girls: Viewing High School Organizations Through the Political Framework***

*A Case Study*

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by David C. McClelland and  
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Political Frame Case Study  
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## **Part I: The Political Framework**

In Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership, Bolman and Deal argue that it is impossible to really understand an entire organization without using a multi-framing perspective. By viewing an organization through the structural, human resources, political and symbolic frames, leaders are better able to avoid--and solve—unforeseen problems. Although Reframing Organizations does not offer a formulaic prescription for each organization's ailments, Bolman and Deal instead empower the reader to use these frames as a starting point for approaching difficult organizational situations with a holistic perspective. In order to gain a multi-frame perspective, students of Organizational Behavior must have a firm grasp of each frame, and can then apply the individual frame perspectives to gain a comprehensive view.

In the following case, we will attempt to strengthen the reader's understanding and interpretation of the Political Frame. Although the concept of "politics" is often symbolized by campaign commercials and speech-making heads of state, we argue that elements of political activity weave their way throughout all organizations. Bolman and Deal explain that the political framework sees organizations as a place where alliances are formed, battles are waged, negotiations are underway and power is key. These sorts of interactions take place everywhere—from the Oval Office to a small non-profit agency, to a suburban high school.

Leaders emerge in the jungle-like world of organizations, and those leaders must be ever mindful of the power-struggles at work. Unless the leaders themselves are consistently grappling for the organization's scarce resources, they too will fall prey to adverse alliances. In the political frame, it is not practical to view each member as a person only interested in doing their work or playing their structured role. Every member is a part of a vast coalition made of various and conflicting interests. To manage in this environment, a leader must identify the alliances and

agendas of every constituent, and they must protect their own positions as leaders by maintaining a sizeable alliance on their side.

Through the lens of the political frame, power is the main objective for all individuals, particularly those jockeying for leadership positions. Bolman and Deal explore eight sources of power: information and expertise, control of rewards, coercive power, alliances and networks, access and control of agendas, framing: control of meaning and symbols, and personal power. By understanding that power is formulated through a combination of many different sources, Bolman and Deal allow the reader to have a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of power and how it is enforced.

Patrick: [more on Sources of Power here....\(other sources\)](#)

Nichole: [Operationalizing Power ... \(other sources\)](#)

According to research conducted by McClelland and Burnham (1976), a leader's use of and affinity toward power has a determining effect on the motivation, and thus performance of their followers. Their findings showed that those managers displaying a greater preference toward the efficient and fair use of power and control in the workplace were most effective, and their employees had the highest levels of motivation and performance. In contrast, those managers with a greater affinity toward personal achievement or affiliation with their staff had weaker performance results. Zaleznik (1970) agrees that leaders who effectively use power can improve the quality of their organization's life, and thus boost the motivation of subordinates.

Zalenik goes on to argue that many individuals seek out other powerful people as a sort of work-place parental figure, forming an emotional attachment to the leader as they would an authoritative parent. Clearly, this element of political power in the workplace can have some positive and negative effects, particularly when a leader is motivated less by institutional power

than their own personal gain. Bolman and Deal (2003) are careful to explain the steps that ought to be taken to prohibit greed and encourage morality in the politically fueled workplace. For example, negotiation can be seen as a “win-win” as opposed to a positional ordeal. If there is potential for both sides to benefit through bargaining, it is optimal to go about this process in such a way that does not insist on a clear win-lose outcome. Similarly, they describe ethical issues in bargaining and general organizational politics. Quoting Burns, “If leaders are to be effective in helping mobilize and elevate their constituencies, leaders must be whole persons, persons with full-functioning capabilities for thinking and feeling” (217). In this way, the authors encourage leaders to be both aware of the importance of the power they wield, and to lead by example as an ethical individual.

While for many people the power wielded by authority figures contains numerous negative connotations, its absence can sometimes prove far more devastating than its presence, creating periods of chaos and disorder. Bolman and Deal separate organizational power structures into two groups: the authorities who make binding decisions and exert social control on partisans, and the partisans who, in turn, “exert bottom-up influence” by lobbying the authorities (193). When partisans gain too much influence and control, the authority structure breaks down. Bolman and Deal point out that partisans can “form a coalition...in an attempt to strengthen their bargaining chip” (193). In the case of an organization, this could be interpreted as workers forming a union to exert influence on managers.

In a way though, partisans have to accept the power of the authorities for them to have any power at all. Partisans that trust authorities “will leave it alone and even support it in the event of an attack” (194). However, if partisans obtain too much influence and power, the power vested in the authorities can dissipate, leading to a power vacuum. Bolman and Deal describe

this period as being particularly dangerous. If a new authority does not assert its power over the partisans, or the existing authority does not reconstitute itself, the organization can fall into a period of anarchy and chaos. It is in the best interest of both partisans and authorities to avoid periods without a source of power. Partisans must maintain a delicate balance between enforcing and demanding ethical and moral leadership while at the same time allowing the authorities to maintain stability and order. One way executives have tried to share their authority is by sharing power with employees through employee stock option plans. In the 1990's, employees, dissatisfied with the leadership of United Airlines, challenged the power structure in the organization by becoming the majority owners through an employee buyout (Bartkus, 1997). While the executives in the long run thwarted the employee efforts, the partisans used their ability to coalesce to temporarily overthrow the authorities, who later reconstituted themselves and reasserted power over the organization.

### Bibliography

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## **Part II: Power is the Great Motivator\***

by David C. McClelland and David H. Burham  
Harvard Business Review, re-printed 2003

### Abstract:

Nowadays, with organizations growing ever flatter and responsibility being pushed further down the ranks, admitting to a desire for power is a little out of fashion. But as the research in this 1976 classic HBR article shows, power is essential to good management. In fact, when it comes to managing big companies, the desire for power--that is, a manager's desire to have an impact, to be strong and influential--is more important than the need to get things done or the wish to be liked. The need to achieve, while important in small companies, actually becomes counterproductive in large, complex organizations, leading managers to try to do things themselves rather than spread tasks among many people. And managers who need to be liked tend to make exceptions for particular subordinates' needs, undermining morale. But seeking power is not the same as seeking glory. People who want power only to further their own careers, rather than the goals of the organization, tend to have subordinates who are loyal to them but not to the company, making them less effective on the whole. And wanting power is not the same as throwing it around. Correlations between employee morale and sales figures show that individuals who manage by fiat are less effective than those whose style is more democratic. As the many examples show, top executives can learn to tell who the good managers are likely to be and to train existing ones to be more effective. McKinsey Award Winner.

*Abstract from Harvard Business On-Line:*

[http://harvardbusinessonline.hbsp.harvard.edu/b02/en/common/item\\_detail.jhtml?id=R0301J](http://harvardbusinessonline.hbsp.harvard.edu/b02/en/common/item_detail.jhtml?id=R0301J)

\*See Appendix A for entire article text.

## **Part III: Mean Girls: Power & Politics in American High Schools\***

Film released in 2004, Directed by Mark Waters, Screenplay by Tina Fey, based on a non-fiction book by Rosalind Wiseman.

After growing up with Anthropologist parents in Africa, Cady Heron is forced to conquer a new kind of jungle—the American high school. As the new girl in school and still untrained in American cultural mores, Cady is quickly swept up in a power-struggle between her outcast friends and the ever-revered and popular “Plastics.” While her original intention is to infiltrate and subvert the ranks of the popular clique, Cady soon finds the power of popularity intoxicating. By the end of her first year of American high school, Cady is among the leadership of the Queen Bees, which will ultimately lead to the loss of her true friendships, and the downfall of her high school’s social power system.

\*See Appendix B for edited (30-minute) version.

## Part IV: Discussion Questions

1. Sources of Power

2. Operationalizing Power

**3. How does Regina George's use of power influence the behavior of the other "Plastics?" The behavior of other students and faculty at her school? If Cady obtains Regina's political strength, is it possible that could she use this power to different ends?**

Although the high school students seemed to both adore and loath Regina George, her powerful position within the social organization at the school had many visible effects on her followers' behavior. Classmates copied Regina's style and vocabulary, and passed along Regina's gossip with vigor. In fact, the behavior of her closest friends was regulated by specific rules governing what to wear, who to date, and who to befriend. Their proximity to power was intoxicating despite Regina's mistreatment—so much so that when Gretchen was demoted to a lower position in the social hierarchy, “she knew it was better to be in the Plastics—hating life—than to not be in at all.”

Despite Cady's original intention to subvert Regina's power, the tactics she employed were typical of a high school Queen Bee. In effect, Regina's power over the behavior of her followers was most effective when the performance was used to dethrone her. But is this behavior a positive achievement for the organization—her high school—or does it only serve the interests of the reigning Queen Bee?

McClelland and Burnham discuss the importance of a leader's thirst for power in their classic 1975 article “Power is the Great Motivator.” Their findings showed that leaders who are motivated by institutional power are more successful in effecting positive performance. Those managers most motivated by personal power or group affiliation showed weaker results within their organization. The authors also emphasized the importance of maturity in a leader's ability

to practice organizationally-minded power usage. Given a typical high school student's maturity level and fixation with personal power, it may have been impossible for Cady to use her newly-found power for the good of her school or with the empowerment of her classmates in mind.

**4. What happens when there is no single source of power? Is there an example from the film of this occurring?**

At the high school, a distinct hierarchy of power exists between the students. The "plastics" propelled themselves into an authority position based on looks, popularity, personal influence, and gossip, which was more often myth than fact. Their power even surmounts the authority of the school administration, which has little effect on the power structure within the partisans', or students', social lives. While a majority of the partisans accept the "plastics" as the authority figures, Janis, a rival of the "plastics", attempts to exert bottom-up influence by using Cady as a pawn to infiltrate the authorities and remove their sources of power. Once Cady is successful at dissipating the power structure and turning two of the "plastics", Karen and Gretchen, against Regina, the "queen bee" of the group, Cady tries to assert herself as the new authority figure.

In the final scene of the case, Regina uses Cady's participation in the creation of the burn-book to circumvent Cady's attempt to thrust herself into the position of the new "queen bee" authority figure on campus. Since Regina is incapable of reasserting herself in an authority position, due to her loss of power over her friends and her recent weight gain which affected her popularity, the student body experiences a power vacuum. No single source of power exists and the partisans enter a state of anarchy. Chaos fills the halls of the school as the secrets maintained by the "plastics" authority in the burn-book is unleashed on the partisans. The burn-book tarnishes any of the potential students who could have assumed the role of the new authority,

such as Cady or Janis. It also severs the possibility of any new coalitions forming between the partisans since the burn-book reveals damaging secrets between normally potential allies. The chaos is brought to order when the principal uses his administrative power to claim temporary authority over the student social structure. Due to the impracticality of the school administration maintaining social order amongst the students, the solution to the power struggle is a power-sharing situation amongst the students where both the former “plastics”, Cady, and Janis’ group maintain order in the student body by collectively preventing new students from obtaining an authoritarian position in the social order.