

CHAPTER 9. POWER, CONFLICT, AND COALITIONS

CHAPTER 9 OVERVIEW

Chapter 9 Summary

In Chapter 9, the authors explore assumptions and ideas of the political perspective. They outline:

1. *Key assumptions* that underlie the perspective.
2. *Central elements* of the frame (power, politics, conflict, coalitions, and conflicting goals).
3. *Sources of politics and political behavior* in organizations (interdependence, enduring differences, scarce resources, and the distribution and exercise of power).

The authors assert that managers and leaders are naive and romantic if they hope to eliminate politics in organizations. Instead, they need to understand and learn how to manage political processes. The authors also examine:

1. *Organizations as coalitions*, contrasting structural, human resource, and political perspectives on organizational goals;
2. *Power and decision making*, comparing structural, human resource, and political definitions of power, updating common understandings about sources of power, and illustrating decision-making processes between authority and partisans in social arenas; and
3. *Conflict in organizations*, viewing it politically as a natural and inevitable part of organizational life and focusing on individual and group strategies for making the best use of political contests.

The chapter concludes with an exploration of moral mazes and political dynamics fostered by managerial needs for personal credibility and “looking good.” The authors raise questions about the moral implications of destructive politics and discuss ways of creating more constructive political dynamics in organizations.

Chapter 9 Key Terms

Authorities: In Gamson’s analysis of political process, those who are entitled to make decisions binding on others and who thus control the social system; they are the recipients or targets of influence and the agents or initiators of social control.

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Partisans: In Gamson's analysis of political process, those who cannot exert control in a social system and so try to change the system by exerting bottom-up influence; they are the agents or initiators of influence and the targets or recipients of social control.

Overbounded system: System in which power is highly concentrated and everything is tightly regulated.

Underbounded system: System in which power is diffuse and control is very loose.

Horizontal conflict: Organizational conflict that occurs at interfaces between departments or divisions.

Vertical conflict: Organizational conflict that occurs at interfaces between levels of the organization.

Cultural conflict: Organizational conflict that occurs at interfaces between groups with different values, traditions, beliefs, and lifestyles.

Chapter 9 Major Case Examples

- The space shuttle *Challenger*
- Attempts to stop brand piracy in China
- Air France
- Political power vacuums in Eastern Europe and China
- Glasnost in the Soviet Union
- Covenant Corporation

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING CHAPTER 9

The central ideas in Chapter 9 revolve around power and politics. Instructors can focus on:

1. Exploring the content of the political frame.
2. Experiencing power, conflict, and political dynamics in organizations.

Teaching methods appropriate for each approach are described in the sections that follow. Student exercises keyed to the approaches appear in "Student Exercises for Chapter 9," beginning on page 10.

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Chapter 9: A Focus on the Content of the Political Frame

Instructors can use this chapter to examine the central elements of the political frame—how politics, conflict, coalitions, conflicting goals, interdependence, enduring differences, scarce resources, and the distribution and exercise of power create alive and screaming political jungles that often overwhelm rationality.

Chapter 9: Cases Focusing on the Content of the Political Frame

Instructors can explore the intricacies of the political frame through large- or small-group case analysis.

- One place to begin is with the *Challenger* case, either as it appears in the text or in a more detailed version (for example, R. Marx, C. Stubbart, V. Traub, and M. Cavanaugh, “The NASA Space Shuttle Disaster: A Case Study,” *Journal of Management Case Studies*, 1987, 3, 300–318, available from Elsevier Science Publishing, 52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017, reprint #0743-9296/87). The case is a rich source of discussion, and many students have memories of the event.

Additional teaching materials for *Challenger* include detailed teaching notes by Marx, Stubbart, Traub, and Cavanaugh in the *Journal of Management Case Studies*. The notes provide a four-frame analysis of the *Challenger* accident, ways to use the case in the classroom, student assignments and worksheets, references and tables, suggestions for additional cases to explore similar issues, and a NASA consulting simulation. The NASA simulation creates four student consulting companies—one each with a structural, a human resource, a political, and a symbolic focus—hired to assist NASA in examining the complex causes of the *Challenger* disaster.

There are also instructor and student materials in Marx, Jick, and Frost’s *Management Live: The Video Book* (Prentice Hall, 1991). The instructor’s materials include a film segment on the *Challenger* explosion and its aftermath and teaching suggestions for using the *Challenger* video. The student workbook has prefilm and postfilm viewing assignments and supplementary readings.

Diane Vaughn’s book on the *Challenger* incident, *The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), is a classic in the organizations literature and could be used as a four-frame case threaded through a course.

- A complementary case activity to use with the *Challenger* case is the Carter Racing case. (See J. Brittain and S. Sitkin, “Facts, Figures, and Organizational Decisions: Carter Racing and Quantitative Analysis in the Organizational Behavior Classroom,” *Organizational Behavior Teaching Review*, 1989–90, 14[1], for complete information about the activity and its use in the classroom.)

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In this case activity, students take the role of John Carter, head of Carter Racing. They must decide whether Carter should withdraw from the last boat race of the season—with significant implications for sponsors and crew morale—because of information that inclement weather on race day could produce an engine blowout. Students are given factual information to assess their choices—but the facts are clouded by personal preferences, feelings, group politics, and judgment calls on what the data mean.

The activity is powerful: Students see the impact of politics on seemingly “unshakable facts.” They have the opportunity to make a go–no go decision in a situation very similar to *Challenger*. Students are sometimes startled to realize that their discussions are quite similar to those surrounding NASA’s decision to launch *Challenger*.

A number of other cases can be used to focus on more specific aspects of the political frame:

- *Power and influence:*
 - With West Point: The Cheating Incident ([A] [HBS 9-481-117]), instructors can work with students to assess the major stakeholders, their interests, and the amount and sources of their power (this approach to political mapping is discussed in chapter 10). This can serve as a general model for diagnosing power dynamics in organizations. Using this information, students can then speculate about the politically viable options available to General Berry. Case C (HBS 9-482-006) explores the actual outcomes of the situation.
 - British Steel Corporation: The Korf Contract (HBS 9-481-110) examines a complex resource allocation process. Instructors can ask students to explore the various influence strategies chosen by decision makers. Two videotapes are available to supplement this case: an interview with Sir Monty Finniston, the former chairman of British Steel, combined with a Granada Television tape of events leading up the critical decisions in the case (HBS 9-882-020) and an abridged version of Finniston’s interview (HBS 9-882-521).
- *Conflict:*
 - The Chattanooga Ice Cream Division (HBS 9-498-001) deals with functional conflict among a company’s senior managers, and the CEO’s struggle to deal with the resulting difficulties.
 - Conoco’s Green Oil Strategy ([A] [HBS 9-392-133], teaching note 5-393-021]) describes the company’s efforts to develop an environmentally sound and politically viable strategy for an oil development in Ecuador. A series of supplements (Block 16: Ecuadorean Government’s Perspective, 9-394-002; Block 16: Environmental Groups’ Perspective, 9-394-004; Block 16: Indigenous

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- People's Perspective, 9-394-003; and Block 16: Management's Perspective, 9-394-075) provide guidelines for role-playing a simulation built around the case.
- West Point: The Cheating Incident, mentioned above, as well as Seneca University (ACE) and the University of Missouri (HGSE), focus on conflict in higher-education settings. Each can be used to explore the impact of conflict on the institution and the challenges facing individual leaders.
 - Thurgood Marshall High School (HBS 9-494-070, teaching note 5-494-087) is a disguised version of an earlier case, Robert F. Kennedy High School (which is reproduced in full in Chapter 20 of *Reframing Organizations*). It depicts conflict along organizational, gender, and ethnic interfaces in an urban school setting and provides a rich illustration of political issues.
 - Mead Corp. ([A] [HBS 9-377-183]) presents a complicated set of employee demands, management concerns, and board-of-director responses confronting the president of a paper-manufacturing company. As with West Point, instructors can use this case to develop a model for sorting through large-scale conflict by looking at the key players: what they want, where they agree or disagree, what interests or concerns they have in common, and their bases of power. Instructors can ask students to diagnose the situation and then explore what the president might do given the constituents' potentially conflicting interests.
 - Collective-bargaining cases such as Air Traffic Controllers (HBS 9-482-056) and Groton Chemical Co. ([A] [HBS 9-678-086] and [B] [HBS 9-678-087]) provide detailed information about opposing positions in a critical conflict. Instructors can explore the facts of the case and then create simulated negotiation sessions between the involved parties.
 - Many of the conflict cases suggested in the teaching notes for Chapter 8 can be used to explore the political dynamics and the organizational implications of interpersonal conflicts.
- *Coalitions:*
- Job Corps (HBS 9-375-152) depicts William Kelly's virtuoso effort to preserve Job Corps, an embattled social service program, during the Johnson and Nixon administrations. Instructors can use the case to illustrate the power of coalitions, processes for building political power bases, and strategies for mobilizing needed support.
 - Seneca University (ACE) focuses on the inability of a university department chair to form necessary coalitions with his faculty and administration. Instructors can use Seneca case alone or after discussion of Job Corps, asking students to apply what they learned from William Kelly about effective politics.
 - Continental Airlines ([A] [HBS 9-385-006]) examines CAL's decisions to file for bankruptcy and top-management strategies to return the airline to profitability. Instructors can ask students to explore Frank Lorenzo's handling of his critical constituencies in order to ensure the airline's survival.

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- *Politics:*
Instructors with executive or advanced management students can assign all or parts of B. Burrough and J. Helyar's *Barbarians at the Gate: The Fall of RJR Nabisco* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), which chronicles political maneuvering in the struggles to gain control of RJR Nabisco. The first three chapters work well for instructors wanting to assign only part of the book. (Parts of that story are detailed at the beginning of Chapter 11 of *Reframing*, and instructors may want to save Burrough and Helyar for that chapter.) The details in *Barbarians at the Gate* provide a stunning behind-the-scenes look at politics in high-level corporate America. Instructors can ask students to compare the public and back-room political actions of the key players, which can be an eye-opening experience for the politically naive student.

Chapter 9: Reading Focusing on the Content of the Political Frame

Instructors can also work with fiction, relying on rich, artistic descriptions of power and politics to offer students insights into political processes.

- Anne Wallach Tolstoi's *Women's Work* (New York: New American Library, 1981) and Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfires of the Vanities* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987) take a look at corporate power, politics, and conflict and their impact on the lives of men and women.
- Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* (New York: Knopf, 1974) explores the powerlessness of the middle manager in the competitive organizational world.

A. Cowden's "Mystery Novels as Organizational Contexts," *Organizational Behavior Teaching Review*, 1989–90, 14(2), provides a host of possible selections from that literary genre. For example:

- Emma Lathen's *Something in the Air* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988) illustrates out-front and behind-the-scenes political maneuvering to keep an airline, similar to People Express, alive and flying.
- Simon Brett's *Shock to the System* (New York: Dell Books, 1984) examines managers caught in the world of shifting corporate values and politics.
- Tony Hillerman's *The Fly on the Wall* (New York: Avon Books, 1971) explores power, politics, and corruption in the media and government.
- Houghton Murphy's *Murders and Acquisitions* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1988) takes a fictional look at the world of corporate takeovers.

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Chapter 9: Films or Videos Focusing on the Content of the Political Frame

Many films offer opportunities for students to observe power and politics in action.

- Excerpts from the film *Wall Street* complement discussions of Murphy's *Murders and Acquisitions* or the RJR Nabisco takeover, both mentioned earlier in the teaching notes for Chapter 9. The film can also stand alone as a way to explore political strategies, ethics, political behavior, and the factors that lead to positive politics or destructive political maneuvering.
- *9 to 5*, *Working Girl*, *Silkwood*, *Roger & Me*, and *Broadcast News* all show darker sides of organizational politics and offer fertile ground for discussion.
- Near the end of *Stand and Deliver*, the scene in which Jaime Escalante confronts Educational Testing Service officials illustrates the interplay of multiple sources of power. The conflict between two different perspectives escalates into mutual use of coercion.
- *How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying* and *M*A*S*H* offer lighter looks at the political savvy needed for survival.
- Films such as *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *Cry Freedom*, *Milagro Beanfield War*, *The River*, *Necessary Parties*, and *Gandhi* take a grass-roots look at power and politics and explore the dynamics and consequences of bottom-up change strategies.
- The classic film *Advise and Consent* depicts power, political jockeying for position, and scandals in the U.S. government. The scene in which Vice-President Harley, an outsider to the major power circles, undermines the dying president's massive political efforts to name a secretary of state is powerful and leads to good discussion about strategies of the seemingly powerless.
- *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* provides a softer slice of Washington politics.
- *The Best Man* takes a fictional look at the behind-the-scenes world of political conventions.
- Bill Moyers's documentary *Crisis of Democracy*, volume 2 in his *World of Ideas* collection, examines many of the political and economic assumptions that underpin American culture.
- The CBS reality series *Survivor*, in which participants vie for a huge prize and vote one another out of the game, provides an excellent opportunity to watch the assumptions of the political frame in action, since the rules of the game create some

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of the basic sources of organizational politics—scarce resources and competing agendas. Almost any episode can be used to examine power, influence, coalition formation, and so forth. The *Survivor* model can also be turned into a class exercise.

Many training and development films illustrate specific aspects of the political frame.

- *Power:*
 - *Effective Uses of Power* (CRM)—explores the development of effective power skills for management.
 - *Delegating* (CRM)—discusses the sharing of power and responsibility through delegation of work tasks and managerial authority.
 - *Power* (Phoenix)—examines the power of the mind to control self and others.

- *Conflict:*
 - *Conflict on the Line: A Case Study* (CRM)—examines the manager’s dilemma in the face of employee conflicts when both have valid arguments and strong beliefs about the correctness of their own solution.
 - *Working with Difficult People* (CRM)—offers simple steps for managing potentially conflict-filled situations.
 - *Managing Conflict: How to Make Conflict Work for You* (Salenger)—explores the costs and benefits of common conflict-management strategies (also available on videocassette.)
 - *Harmonics of Conflict* (IVCH)—presents conflict as an essential part of human relationships and suggests four ways of problem solving in the face of conflict.
 - *Scenes from the Workplace* (IVCH) presents eight vignettes of management-employee conflicts in different work settings.
 - *Five Steps to Conflict Resolution* (IU)—illustrates potential conflict situations in a university setting and proposes five steps for constructive conflict resolution.
 - *The Roger Berg Story* (Salenger)—explores a conflict in values between Roger and his organization that will eventually affect his decisions and career.

- *Bargaining, grievances, and negotiation:*
 - *The Art of Negotiating* (BNA) is a series of twelve videos that cover topics such as preparing to negotiate, strategies and tactics, understanding barriers to successful negotiation, and hidden meanings in nonverbal cues. *Anatomy of a Grievance* (IVCH) traces the evolution of a formal grievance from an encounter between a boss and a union steward to the finding of a binding solution. Its sequel, *Arbitration of a Grievance* (IVCH), explores binding arbitration as a method for resolving grievances. *Button . . . Button* (IVCH) explores one of the vignettes from *Scenes from the Workplace* in detail, examining the role and procedures for the grievance process. *Waldenville I* and *II* and *Dimensions of Bargaining* (IVCH) examine the collective-bargaining process. Film I ends with a deadlock and decision to seek mediation. Film II focuses on the role and strategies

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of the mediator in this case. *Dimensions of Bargaining* examines the internal and external influences on the Waldenville collective-bargaining process. *Beginning of Conflict* (IU) previews an upcoming labor-management contract dispute and explores issues for future bargaining sessions.

Chapter 9: A Focus on Experiencing Power and Politics

Chapter 9 is a perfect spot for simulations or activities that give students experience with power and politics.

Chapter 9: Activities Focusing on Experiencing Power and Politics

Simulation activities can be built around cases.

- Conoco's Green Oil Strategy ([A] [HBS 9-392-133], teaching note 5-393-021]), as mentioned earlier, describes the company's efforts to develop an environmentally sound and politically viable strategy for an oil development in Ecuador. A series of supplements (Block 16: Ecuadorean Government's Perspective, 9-394-002; Block 16: Environmental Groups' Perspective, 9-394-004; Block 16: Indigenous People's Perspective, 9-394-003; and Block 16: Management's Perspective, 9-394-075) provide guidelines for role-playing a simulation built around the case.
- The Bolman and Deal power simulation is a simple option that requires nothing more than a large, suitable space. Students are divided into three groups with markedly different amounts of power and resources. The activity provides rich data on individual and systemic aspects of power, the distinctive experiences and perspectives of partisans and authorities, and connections to the other frames. Information on the simulation is available from several sources. *Exchange: The Organizational Behavior Teaching Journal*, 1979, 4, 38–42, gives instructions, processing suggestions, and typical student reactions. Information can also be found on-line at http://bloch.umkc.edu/classes/Bolman/power_simulation.htm. Ideas on using the simulation appear in the instructor's manual for *Organizational Behavior with Infotrac: Experiences and Cases*, 6th ed. (South Western, 2001) by Dorothy Marcic, Joe Seltzer, and Peter Vaill, as well as in *Negotiation: Readings, Exercises, and Cases*, 4th ed. (McGraw-Hill, 1999) by Roy Lewicki, David Saunders, Bruce Barry, and John Minton. The instructor's guide in Lewicki et al. includes instructions for the simulation and overheads for use in debriefing.
- A variation on the power simulation is Lee Bolman's *Management Resources Corporation: An Organizational Simulation*. As mentioned in the Chapter 3 teaching notes, the simulation creates a three-tiered production company trying to generate advertising slogans for a client system. Instructors who have not already used this simulation can run it in connection with the political frame and focus on the power

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implicit in structural differences, sources of conflict, individual influence strategies, political dynamics, and so on. (See Exercise 10.1.) Versions of the simulation for educational, private-sector, and public-sector contexts are available on-line at http://bloch.umkc.edu/classes/bolman/organization_simulation.htm.

- The Construction Company simulation is a third choice, if it has not been already used in connection with Chapter 5 or Chapter 8. A version to be used with the political frame appears as Exercise 9.1.
- The large-scale *Northwood Arts Center* simulation offers firsthand experience in building strong ties to multiple constituencies. (See S. Stumpf and R. Dunbar's "Using Behavioral Simulations in Teaching Strategic Management Processes," *Organizational Behavior Teaching Review*, 1989–90, 14(2), for information about obtaining and running this simulation.)
- Another option is to disrupt the prevailing power balance between teacher and student in the classroom. Two ways to do this are presented in Exercise 9.2.
- Finally, many experiential activities focus on political dynamics. Marcic, Seltzer, and Vaill's *Organizational Behavior with Infotrac: Experiences and Cases*, 6th ed. (South Western, 2001) contains a number of good exercises in the sections on power and political behavior and conflict and negotiation. The Pfeiffer and Jones series (*Handbook of Structured Experiences for Human Relations Training*) includes the following useful activities: #36—Win As Much As You Can (vol. 1); #41—Status Interaction Study (vol. 1); #105—Wooden Blocks: A Competition Exercise (vol. 4); #150—Riddles: Intergroup Competition (vol. 5); #160—Tinkertoy Bridge (vol. 5); #161—Lego Bridge (vol. 5); #164—Testing: An Intergroup Competition (vol. 5); #167—Cups: A Power Experience (vol. 5); #218—Spy: An Intergroup Activity (vol. 6); #263—Trading Cards: A Power Simulation (vol. 7); #264—War Gaming: An Intergroup Competition (vol. 7); and #266—Power Personalities: An OD Role Play (vol. 7).

STUDENT EXERCISES FOR CHAPTER 9

EXERCISE 9.1

Focus: Experiencing Power and Politics

The Construction Company simulation developed by Lee Bolman and Barbara Bunker (Exercise 5.3, Exercise 8.3) can be adapted for use in the context of political frame concerns. In this context, groups can become competitive in their interactions and rely on

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questionable efforts to undermine their competitors. (Instructors can up the ante by raising building permit prices and maximizing financial rewards to winners.) Processing should include an exploration of the effects of competition on group performance and satisfaction, a diagnosis of intragroup and intergroup political dynamics, and the ethical implications of political strategies.

Instructions for the simulation are as follows:

Task: To construct the greatest number of houses according to specifications in one five-minute building period.

Materials: 200 3-by-5 index cards, two red and two black felt-tipped markers, and one roll of clear tape for each work group.

Room arrangement: Space for each team to plan and one designated space for public construction (a large table or desk is perfect).

Process:

- Teams may plan for as long as they wish.
- Each team will have one five-minute public construction period.
- No materials that have been bent, folded, torn, taped, or marked may be used in the public construction phase.
- When teams are ready to start their construction, they should notify the instructor, who also acts as the judge.
- Building permits cost \$2 per group and are to be purchased when a group is ready to build. (Instructors can vary the amount, as indicated above.)
- The judge will announce when any team is entering public construction.
- All teams must begin construction by a time posted by the instructor. Only one team can construct at a time. If two teams request a permit to build at the same time, the judge shall determine to whom the first permit is issued. All decisions of the judge are final.
- The winning team will be awarded the money in the building fund.

House specifications: All houses must:

- Be two stories high.
- Have a peaked roof.
- Have a brick chimney with holes for smoke (that is, more than one dimension).
- Have at least four framed windows on the second floor and two doors and two windows on the first floor.
- Have a floor between stories.
- Withstand the judge's quality test: a drop from five inches without being damaged or falling apart.

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Time requirements: At least one and one-fourth to one and one-half hours for teams to work before the construction deadline. Time should be set aside for groups to debrief and then for a general class discussion.

EXERCISE 9.2

Focus: Experiencing Power and Politics

Disrupting the prevailing power balance in the classroom offers students a way to experience power and politics. Two options for doing this follow.

Option 1. Assume a very different teaching stance for a class and explore student reactions to it. Tell students in advance that in the next class you will experiment with a different instructional format: You will bring a set of index cards to class with each student's name, call on people at random, and ask them questions about the reading. Ask students to predict what impact this format will have on the class, especially since they know in advance.

Open the next class by choosing cards at random and asking the first couple of students what they predicted; then continue with the same process, asking questions about the reading. This process typically evokes powerful ambivalence and conflict involving two different impulses for responding to authority: resistance and rebellion versus cooperation and loyalty. Some groups will revolt. If the rebellion becomes strong enough, one option is to tell the class you can no longer teach in these circumstances and then go and sit quietly in a chair at the back of the room. There will likely be various student efforts to replace your authority, but with little chance of success.

At an appropriate moment, open a discussion of what happened and what can be learned from it. (Excerpts from the film *The Paper Chase* showing a law professor conducting his class in a similar manner can be used as part of the debrief.)

This exercise works best in classes where students tend to be active and confident in class discussions. In a class where students are mostly quiet and deferential, they are more likely to suffer in silence. One way to increase the likelihood of an active response is to break students into small groups about half an hour into the class and ask them to discuss how the class is progressing. When they return, you can continue to call on people using the cards but can ask them about their small group discussions.

Note that this exercise can be extremely powerful. You will want to inform students about your plans beforehand and then provide sufficient time for debriefing afterwards. Even when they know what to expect and why, this is often a highly charged event for students—and for the instructor.

Option 2. A very simple but powerful exercise involves opening a class by announcing that you are turning the class over to students today to explore issues of power and authority. After making this announcement, move to a spot in the back of the room and

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sit down. Initially, this usually produces a very awkward period in which little seems to be happening. Students may turn to you in search of more guidance. Deflect these efforts either by remaining silent or by making statements like, “You’re in charge,” or “That’s for you to decide.” Eventually, individuals will begin to initiate efforts to get something to happen. Be prepared for criticism of your irresponsibility and failure to do your job. Occasionally, an individual will simply walk out in frustration. Typically, students will struggle to fill the power vacuum, try to pressure you to reassume control, and then begin to argue about strategies for taking control of their learning.

You can plan to let this process continue for a relatively short time (15 to 20 minutes) or for considerably longer. In any event, be prepared to lead a discussion of what happened and what can be learned. Discussion questions might include the following:

1. What did you feel when I sat down?
2. What happened next?
3. How did it shift power relations in the class?
4. What political processes did you see in operation?
5. What kinds of power did you see in operation?
6. What can we learn about authority and its absence? What happens when authority ceases to function? (Students may think about examples like Iraq after the fall of the government. You can ask whether it was predictable that Iraq would become chaotic once the existing structure of authority collapsed.)