Chapter VI
Politics, Leadership, and Information Technology

Introduction

The underlying premise of this chapter is that information is power and consequently information management is inherently political. Information asymmetries give an advantage of one actor over others (Bellamy, 2000). Maintaining control over information can allow an individuals, departments, or organizations to control how successful they appear to others and thus may protect autonomy, job security, and funding. Therefore, in order to provide effective leadership for IT, the generalist and head IT manager will need to actively engage themselves in both internal and external politics.

An excellent case illustrating the importance of political issues in managing IT occurred in California. The California Department of Information Technology (DOIT) was eliminated in June of 2002 (Peterson, 2002). The Department had been created in 1995 in order to solve the problem of several disastrous contracts in the IT area including a DMV project that cost over $50 million but never functioned as planned (Peterson, 2002). Peterson (2002) cites accounts from observers to support the argument that a major reason for the failure was due to the other major agencies that viewed the new department as a threat to their power and lobbied to reduce the authority of the agency in the legislation creating it. In particular, the opponents lobbied to deny the new DOIT control over operations in the legislation creating DOIT. Those with interests that were opposed to the new DOIT included existing departments that had major authority in the IT field and/or those with large data centers. The opposition was successful so that the legislation limited DOIT’s role mainly to authority over the budget. Consequently, the
DOIT did not have control over data centers and was not able to achieve one of its major goals to centralize and consolidate these data centers (Peterson, 2002). This lack of operational authority limited its ability to influence other departments as Peterson (2002) summarizes:

Without controlling data centers or California’s telecommunications network, DOIT simply had no juice, some sources argued. Because DOIT didn’t add value to other state agencies, it couldn’t exert any leverage on those agencies. DOIT could present ideas, but it couldn’t make any real contribution to making those ideas happen. In other words, with the Department of Finance controlling IT budget processes, the Department of General Services controlling IT procurement and the state data centers handling computing needs, what was the DOI’s responsibility?

Also, according to observers, the head of DOIT was not allowed to sit in on Cabinet meetings and there were reported cases of other departments doing “end arounds” concerning the formal requirement for DOIT to approve all major new projects. Another symbol of the weakness of the DOIT was that the governor appointed a new head of e-government who was independent of the DOIT, again lending credence to the perception that the DOIT lacked respect and power. The precipitating event in the death of DOIT was the quick approval by DOIT of a controversial project with the Oracle Corporation that resulted in an investigation and the resignation of several of the state’s top IT officials. The California case illustrates how IT can become enmeshed in both internal and external political issues that I will analyze in this chapter.

In some cases such as those previously discussed, politics appears to refer to actions that tend to be viewed by outside observers as narrow-minded and self-serving. However, it is important to note that I use the term “politics” in a non-judgmental manner. Politics can be about money and the “mobilization of bias” as Schattschneider (1983) described it as different forces struggle to prevail. But politics can also be thought of as the attempt to mobilize the resources to achieve public objectives and thus is a necessary part of implementing any major project. I agree with Dickerson (2002) that politics need not be a “lot of nasty back-stabbing and infighting” but is most often about “working and negotiating with others…to get things done.” It can be as simple as practicing good communication skills to keep others informed.

Although information management involves many technical issues, it is important to understand that it is involves major political challenges. A large portion of governmental information managers come from technical backgrounds such as computer science and business. They usually have excellent technical skills and they can quickly rise to leadership positions such as Chief Information Officer (CIO). However, decision-making concerning the management of information technology (IT) requires more than technical knowledge as Towns (2004) notes:

There’s increasing talk that CIO’s don’t need to be technologists because the position’s nature is changing. Project management skills and people skills now mean more to a CIO than IT skills, the argument goes…. (p. 15)