

A COMPLIMENTARY RESOURCE

Thirteen Political Games Every Organization Plays

It is not a character problem. It is a structure problem wearing a character costume.

Neal McIntyre Consulting

Politics Is Not a Personality Problem

Every organization has politics. The instinct is to blame the people involved: someone is too ambitious, too territorial, too resistant to change.

That instinct is almost always wrong, or at least incomplete. Political behavior is usually a predictable response to a gap left by formal structure. When the formal system does not resolve a real tension, an informal one grows up to resolve it instead.

Politics is not what happens when good people go bad. It is what happens when formal structure leaves a vacuum, and something always rushes in to fill it.

Below are thirteen recognizable political games found inside organizations. Read through them and see which ones you recognize. Naming the pattern is the first step toward fixing the structural gap underneath it, instead of blaming the people caught inside it.

1. The Insurgency Game

What It Looks Like: Someone with real expertise or informal influence, but no formal authority, actively resists or undermines decisions made above them.

Why It Happens: There is a gap between where real expertise sits and where formal authority sits.

2. The Counterinsurgency Game

What It Looks Like: Leadership responds to resistance not by addressing the underlying grievance, but by tightening control and adding oversight.

Why It Happens: A structural gap is being treated as a loyalty problem, which usually makes it worse.

3. The Sponsorship Game

What It Looks Like: Someone attaches themselves to a powerful patron for protection or advancement, rather than building influence through results.

Why It Happens: Formal advancement criteria are weak, unclear, or unevenly applied.

4. The Alliance-Building Game

What It Looks Like: Peers quietly form a coalition to increase their collective bargaining power against another person or department.

Why It Happens: No trusted forum exists for resolving disagreement across teams.

5. The Empire-Building Game

What It Looks Like: A manager expands their department's headcount or budget to increase personal power, not strictly to meet a real need.

Why It Happens: Resource decisions are not clearly tied to actual business priorities.

6. The Budgeting Game

What It Looks Like: Departments inflate requests or sandbag targets specifically to protect their allocation next cycle.

Why It Happens: Budgeting has become a political ritual instead of a planning tool.

7. The Expertise Game

What It Looks Like: A specialist withholds or obscures knowledge to stay indispensable, rather than because it is genuinely too complex to share.

Why It Happens: This is one of the clearest warning signs of continuity risk on this entire list. Institutional knowledge is deliberately concentrated in one person, and instantly lost the day that person leaves.

8. The Lording Game

What It Looks Like: Someone with narrow authority over one small process uses it to make others visibly defer, well beyond what the role requires.

Why It Happens: Authority was granted without matching accountability.

9. The Line Versus Staff Game

What It Looks Like: Operational leaders and support functions like finance or human resources fight an ongoing battle over whose judgment governs a decision.

Why It Happens: Decision rights between operating authority and advisory authority were never made explicit.

10. The Rival Camps Game

What It Looks Like: Two significant factions form, often around competing visions or succession candidates, and most decisions become a proxy battle between them.

Why It Happens: A succession or strategic direction question has gone unresolved for too long.

11. The Strategic Candidates Game

What It Looks Like: A project or initiative is pushed hard, not on its own merits, but to advance a specific person's influence or candidacy.

Why It Happens: Succession is being contested informally, with no formal process to resolve it.

12. The Whistle-Blowing Game

What It Looks Like: An insider takes concerns to an outside party, like a regulator or the media, after internal channels have failed.

Why It Happens: Internal escalation paths are not trusted, regardless of how the specific issue plays out.

13. The Young Turks Game

What It Looks Like: A rising, capable group challenges existing leadership's direction ahead of any formal succession timeline.

Why It Happens: A structural gap exists that senior leadership is not yet willing to admit.

Quick Reference

Game	One-Line Signal
Insurgency	Principled resistance with no path to resolution
Counterinsurgency	New oversight introduced right after conflict
Sponsorship	Advancement tracks with relationships, not results
Alliance-Building	Decisions pre-negotiated before formal meetings
Empire-Building	Growth outpacing any clear business need
Budgeting	Consistent over-request and underspend
Expertise	Documentation that never quite gets finished
Lording	Simple requests requiring unusual ceremony
Line Versus Staff	Recommendations routinely watered down or ignored
Rival Camps	Same two sides on every unrelated issue
Strategic Candidates	Advocacy far more intense than the issue warrants
Whistle-Blowing	A surprise external inquiry about a known issue
Young Turks	Capable newer people questioning old assumptions

What To Do With This List

Do not use this list to label people. Use it to locate the structural gap underneath the behavior.

- If you recognize one or two games, that is normal. Most organizations carry a couple of these quietly, most of the time.
- If you recognize four or more happening at once, that is worth taking seriously. It usually means an organization is further into a difficult transition than anyone has said out loud.
- The Expertise Game and the Strategic Candidates Game deserve the most attention. Both are early, reliable signals of a deeper continuity risk, not just routine friction.

Naming the game correctly is the fastest way to stop arguing about personalities and start fixing the structure underneath them.

If you are recognizing more of these than you would like to admit, that is exactly the kind of conversation worth having with someone outside your organization.

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