

MGMT 7720 — POWER & POLITICS IN ORGANIZATIONS (FALL Q1 OW 2023)

Professor Samir Nurmohamed (“Prof Nurmo”) | nurmo@wharton.upenn.edu | [Canvas Website](#)

Dates: October 16-20, 2023 (see schedule)
Email: nurmo@wharton.upenn.edu
Office: SHDH 2103



COURSE OBJECTIVES

“Power is to the organization as oxygen is to breathing” (Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006: 3).

“Every social relationship is a power equation” (Hawley, 1963: 422).

“Nothing discloses real character like the use of power” (Ingersoll, 2009: 14).

There are many tensions to holding and exercising power in organizations. Whether you have an appetite or disdain for it, power and politics play an essential role in your career. Power and politics enable people to accomplish and pursue their goals. At the same time, you can exercise power in ways that hurt others, either directly or indirectly.

The purpose of this course is to introduce you to concepts that are useful for understanding, analyzing, and navigating power dynamics in organizations. But beyond discovering ways to extend your power in organizations, we will also uncover lessons about how it can blind you and how to navigate situations in which you are up against those with authority or influence. We will extract various lessons about power and politics in organizations using a range of scholarly articles, cases, exercises, and assessments. Topics include diagnosing power and politics in organizations, building coalitions, networks, managing conflict, speaking up for yourself and others, and leading change (e.g., issue selling, change management, and downsizing). The course requires that students submit assignments for almost every class session and complete final deliverables.

This course aims to develop leadership, general management, and career skills through a better understanding of power and politics. It also relates to other courses on these topics in the Management department. Thematically, this course highlights how your relationships with organizational stakeholders and an understanding of the organizational context are crucial to successfully navigating the political terrain of organizations. Organizations are inherently political arenas that require social astuteness and an understanding of the “rules of the game.”

TEXT AND READINGS

I have personally curated the materials for this course (accessible via Canvas). Some of the readings and exercises are not in the course pack (e.g., they will be posted online), but you will be told about them during the course. You must complete the assigned readings and exercises *before* class on the day shown in the schedule (listed at the end of the syllabus). You will get more out of the course by completing the readings ahead of each class. Please note that the readings and preparation questions are subject to change at my discretion.

COURSE EXPECTATIONS AND EVALUATION

All classes will be held in person and synchronously unless otherwise noted by the instructor. A critical component of the success of this course depends on *you*. This class relies on informed engagement for learning, and we reinforce this in several ways:

- For each class session, you are expected to be on time and ready to participate after completing the preassigned work.
- This course has a mandatory attendance policy. Given the short time frame of the course, you are expected to attend every class. If you cannot attend every class, I urge you to reconsider whether this course is appropriate for you, as failing to attend sessions could result in being dropped from the course. Please do not enroll at the expense of your peers who plan to attend every class.
- If you will be absent for unforeseen reasons, you should contact me and the TA. It should also be reported to the academic office and/or using the course absence report system. You are welcome to have your academic advisor email us on your behalf if you cannot attend class for an excused reason (please ensure they have received appropriate documentation so that you do not receive a full deduction). You are responsible for getting up to speed with any missed coursework.
- Auditing is not permitted. Because course engagement is critical to the success of the course, absences, a lack of preparation, or the misuse of an electronic device can seriously affect your grade (i.e., it can result in D/F/LT grades in the course even if you pass other parts of the course), and I reserve the right to drop you from the course.

Lastly, this course also depends on me. You should expect me to deliver high-quality content and class sessions. I will be disappointed if there is a problem in the classroom—particularly one that could be remedied—but nobody shares it with me. Although I cannot guarantee that I will satisfy all your suggestions, I will try my best to address them. I have articulated these course expectations because abiding by them will foster a better and more supportive learning environment.

Course Evaluation

Your overall grade is based on the following components (more detail is provided below):

Components	Grade Value	Due Date
1. Class Contribution		
A. Preparation Assignments	30%	Listed on Canvas
B. Class Participation	15%	Throughout the Course
C. Class Assessments	10%	Throughout the Course
2. Team “Pushin’ P” Presentation		
A. Proposal	5%	October 17, 2023
B. Final Presentation	40%	October 20, 2023

1) Class Contribution

There are three components to your class contribution grade:

A) Preparation Assignments

Preparation assignments help you acquire a deeper understanding of course concepts and prepare for classroom discussions using the material assigned for the day. These preparation assignments will usually require you to respond to one of the questions listed on Canvas for each class session before the deadline. Similar to the business world, work must be delivered on time. *Therefore, you will only be eligible to receive credit for a preparation assignment if you submit it by the deadline (i.e., assignments submitted after the deadline will receive zero credit—no exceptions).*

Unless otherwise specified, responses should be no shorter than 250 words and no longer than 500 words. You will be graded on the appropriate use and application of concepts, as well as the clarity and insightfulness of your assignment.

B) Participation

High-quality class contribution involves knowing when to speak and when to listen so that you can learn from others. In this course, quality is more important than the quantity of comments. You are expected to attend every class session, having read and reflected on the assigned material. A contribution to the class discussion is a comment that features one or more of the following properties:

- Uses logic, evidence, and related material (e.g., readings, data) to support conclusions and is more than an expression of an opinion or feeling;
- Shows curiosity, creativity, and the willingness to experiment;
- Takes into consideration the ideas already offered by others and moves the analysis forward to generate new insights; and/or
- Encourages others to participate. I am a proponent of viewpoint diversity, which means that debates must be conducted respectfully. Please visit www.openmindplatform.org to discover ways to cultivate intellectual humility and openness.

Comments that are vague, repetitive, unrelated, disrespectful of others, or without sufficient foundation are discouraged and will be evaluated negatively. I will undertake “supportive cold calling” to encourage balanced involvement, appropriate preparation, and elevate the quality of in-class discussions.

C) Class Assessments

Class assessments reinforce your learning in the course. These short assessments will usually require you to respond to question(s) either during or after class to reinforce what we discussed in class. To ensure that you are keeping up with the course—but also ensure that you are not overloaded with assignments—these assessments will not always be announced in advance, but they will also occur less frequently than the preparation assignments. *Similar to the preparation assignments, you must complete the assessments during the designated time period (i.e., assessments submitted after the deadline will receive zero credit—no exceptions will be made).*

2) Team Project: “Pushin’ P” Presentation

Your assigned team will prepare and deliver a 5-minute presentation on a core concept or question that is related to power and politics in organizations (what is called a “Pushin’ P Presentation”). The core concept or question should **NOT** be a rehash of material already shared in the course. Instead, your goal should be to advance our understanding of a core concept or question related to power and politics in organizations that may not be directly addressed in the course and is of relevance to you and your peers. Examples may include, “How should I think about exerting power in another region of the world?” “How can I deal with having a boss who constantly uses fear and intimidation?” “How should I navigate a flat hierarchy?” and “What are the challenges and opportunities for enacting power if I am a cultural outsider?” To inform your presentation, you should gather 2-3 research articles from relevant academic journals (a list is provided below) that provide key insights on your core question or concept. We will ask groups to present distinct topics to promote breadth.

Your presentation should feature a (1) compelling introduction of the core question or concept (e.g., a story, example, case, or demonstration), (2) a definition or description of the core question or concept and its relevance to power and politics at work, (3) a synthesis of the academic research on the topic, and (4) a set of key takeaways on how you and your classmates can apply the research to their own work. Please do not let the structure of your presentation confine your creativity in developing your presentation, as the novelty of your content and presentation will be evaluated positively. Moreover, ideas that challenge concepts presented in the course will be appreciated if you use sound research evidence. Your presentation will be evaluated in terms of a) interestingness and relevance of your topic, b) content and support for your ideas, c) application of the research to practice, and d) delivery of your presentation. You may choose to do your presentation in person, record it in advance to be played in front of everyone or take a hybrid approach. Make sure you cite relevant sources in your presentation materials.

Academic journals that you may want to consult include (if you go beyond this list of journals, please consult with me for approval before/after class):

- Academy of Management Journal
- Administrative Science Quarterly
- Personnel Psychology
- Academy of Management Discoveries
- Journal of Management
- Journal of Organizational Behavior
- Journal of Experimental and Social Psychology
- Personality and Social Psychology Review
- Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes
- Academy of Management Review
- Journal of Applied Psychology
- Organization Science
- Journal of Personality and Social Psychology
- Psychological Science
- Personality and Social Psychology Review
- Social Psychological and Personality Science

Please note: for all components of your grade, any grading inquiries must be raised within 2 days of the grade being posted.

CODE OF CONDUCT, WELLNESS AND CONTINGENCY PLANNING

Personal integrity and professionalism are fundamental values of Wharton and the University of Pennsylvania community. To help ensure that these values are upheld and maintain equitability in evaluating your work, this course will be conducted in strict conformity with the Academic Honor Code. Please be aware that a violation of the honor code is a serious violation. You are required to do original work; all assignments in this class must be completed independently unless otherwise

specified. Furthermore, you are not allowed to use ChatGPT (or tools like it) for your work for this class unless specified by the instructor. Using such tools will be considered a violation of Penn's Code of Academic Integrity and suspected use will be reported to the Center for Community Standards & Accountability. If you have any questions about any of the policies listed in this syllabus, please let me know. The University of Pennsylvania's Code of Academic Integrity can be examined at the following website:

www.upenn.edu/academicintegrity/ai_codeofacademicintegrity.html

Our class discussion stays in class. That is, your part in ensuring that we have a safe and open learning environment is to hold in confidence our discussions, keeping them within the class. The class is intended to cultivate viewpoint diversity, so debates must be conducted respectfully and with humility (please visit www.openmindplatform.org to discover ways to cultivate intellectual humility and openness). In addition, to avoid undermining the educational experiences of your classmates or future classes, do not take screenshots, photos of the simulation, or any content capture of course materials. Doing so is a violation of the university's honor code and copyright.

Wharton and the University of Pennsylvania offer numerous services and initiatives for wellness. Any member of the Penn community can use these services. More information can be found by visiting <https://www.wharton.upenn.edu/wharton-wellness/> or by calling 215-898-HELP.

If we are "virtual" at any point, we will make the necessary arrangements. For virtual class sessions, you are expected to be on time and ready to participate with your camera "on" at all times on your computer (if this is not possible, please contact me and the MBA office to make alternative arrangements). You are expected to focus on the class (e.g., taking notes, actively participating, off your phone, not toggling between the class and other windows or devices).

Please note that this syllabus and the course outline are subject to change at the instructor's discretion.

COURSE SCHEDULE

#	Dates & Topics	Materials for Session
1	October 16 1:00-4:30 pm Diagnosing and Exercising Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nurmohamed, “What Behavioral Science Tells Us about Power” - Pfeffer, “Choosing Where to Start” - Bendersky, “How to Get Ideological Opponents to Work with You”
2	October 17 1:00-4:30 pm Relational Power and Life Transitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Morrison, “The Downsides of ‘Being Yourself’ at Work - Cross, Nohria & Parker, “Six Myths about Informal Networks” - Case: Zarina Lalji (Part A-to be distributed before the session)
3	October 18 2:00-5:00 pm Mystery Session (To Be Announced)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Greer, “Four Keys to a Healthy Workplace Hierarchy” - Maner and Case, “The Essential Tension Between Leadership and Power” - Peterson, “Don’t take the wrong paths to power”
4	October 19 9:30-3:30 pm Building, Losing & Regaining Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Case: Jeffrey Sonnenfeld - Nurmohamed, “The Upside of Being an Underdog” - Meyerson, “Tempered Radicals”
5	October 20 10:00 pm-12:00 pm Course Wrap-Up & Team Presentations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No readings assigned

Note: My materials are curated from numerous sources (e.g., academic and practitioner journals, books, magazines, blogs, cases) because I want to reflect the breadth and depth of perspectives on power and politics. For students who are interested in reading beyond this course or who are unable to register for this course, you can find additional materials below, as well as on [LinkedIn](#) by searching for #poweritup:

- Power: Why Some People Have It—and Others Don’t (Pfeffer)
- Give and Take (Grant)
- All You Have to Do Is Ask (Baker)
- Power, for All (Battilana & Casciaro)
- Act Like a Leader, Think Like a Leader (Ibarra)
- You Have More Influence than You Think (Bohns)