

1998

# The Office Makes a Difference: An Exercise on the Politics of Office Space

Susan Stites-Doe

*The College at Brockport*, [sstites@brockport.edu](mailto:ssites@brockport.edu)

Melissa L. Waite

*The College at Brockport*, [mwaite@brockport.edu](mailto:mwaite@brockport.edu)

Rajnandini Pillai

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## Repository Citation

Stites-Doe, Susan; Waite, Melissa L.; and Pillai, Rajnandini, "The Office Makes a Difference: An Exercise on the Politics of Office Space" (1998). *Business-Economics Faculty Publications*. 9.

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## **THE OFFICE MAKES A DIFFERENCE: AN EXERCISE ON THE POLITICS OF SPACE**

**Susan Stites-Doe**

**Melissa Waite**

State University of New York College at Brockport

**Rajnandini Pillai**

University of Miami

In this article we report the benefits of a new case study that explores gender bias, organizational culture, and organizational politics. The case is based on true events, and centers on the assignment of office space to a newly-promoted female vice president at a savings and loan bank. Office space is argued by many to be symbolic of power in organizations. The experiences of the main character in the case point to power imbalances that result from gender-based cultural values and the character's inadequate attention to political behavior.

*Usage:* We have utilized the case successfully in both undergraduate and graduate management classes, and find it to be particularly useful in encouraging integration across these topics: *Gender Bias, perception, organizational culture, political action, sources of power, status in groups, managerial competency and evaluation.* The case can be administered as either an abbreviated 20-minute, or a full 60-minute experiential activity, depending on options chosen and the amount of pre-session preparation done by participants. The full case is available via the addresses provided below, the following summary is extracted from it.

*Facilitator materials:* An annotated bibliography accompanies the case. Discussion questions and instructor's notes are also provided; samples of each follow.

*A summary of the case:* Diane Rabb was promoted to the level of Vice President of Training and Development after creating the department and managing it for a period of five years. She was

capable, highly regarded, and drew from her long history of career success in human resource management. A determination from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) prompted First Union<sup>1</sup> to recruit more women to upper management positions, and she received notice of her promotion shortly after the ruling.

The V.P. title carried many attractive perquisites, including private office space. A corner office with two floor-to-ceiling glass walls was built for her. She decorated it inexpensively, using her old office furniture, and following modern decor. These choices contrasted sharply with decisions made by other V.P.'s who ordered a full array of conservative Early American style furniture, brass lighting fixtures, and appropriate decorative items. Other indications of First Union's culture could be found in the artwork hanging on the walls of the top floor of the building; a print hanging on the wall of the board room depicted nude female silhouettes arranged in an abstract manner.

Diane often felt separated from her colleagues. She was proud of being, as she put it, "quietly competent," and allowed her accomplishments to go both unnoticed and uncredited. Unlike many of her male colleagues, she did not have much outside-of-work social contact with her co-workers, i.e., she didn't play golf, didn't sit in company seats at football games, and seldom had drinks with co-workers after work. Nor did she have a mentor. She worried that her position in the organization was insecure because of her relatively weak social network.

After occupying her office for one day she was shocked to learn that it would have to be torn down. The office would be rebuilt to comply with a recently unearthed policy regarding office specifications for vice presidents; her office was four square feet too large. The building supervisor had ignored policy in designing the space, favoring utility and aesthetics, as he had in many other

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<sup>1</sup>First Union is a fictitious name.

previous projects. When informed of the policy, Diane reacted cooperatively. At the same time, she was embarrassed and concerned about how this might effect department morale.

*Case Epilogue:* Diane Rabb never occupied the office space she earned with her promotion. In response to her plea for avoiding the cost of reconstruction, the space was utilized as a conference room, accessible to the entire department. Despite her reputation for technical competency, her professional personal department, and good feedback from her internal customers, Diane was fired within one year of her promotion. Economic conditions were blamed for her dismissal. In spite of this explanation, several other staff V.P.'s with approximately equal organizational tenure were retained. The organization's current standing with the Equal Opportunity Commission is unknown.

*Sample annotated references:* The following sample is expanded on in the full version. Pfeffer, Jeffrey (1991). *Managing with Power: Politics and Influence in Organization*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Chapter three of this book provides excellent illustrations of the use of office space as a power tool. In this chapter, Pfeffer refers to the symbols of power, prominent among which is physical space. The allocation of physical space in the organization is one of the most discernible symbols of power. For instance, the location of top management offices on top floors, the transfer of office space from one department/individual to another, are all indications of the relative power of organizational members. Some firms even establish formal policies and rules that translate status into office accouterments. For instance, in one firm described by Pfeffer, managers are given either linoleum or carpet, depending on their level of the hierarchy. This sort of policy can be carried to bizarre extremes; in one company cited by Pfeffer, two people at different levels of the organization shared an office. The company split the office down the middle, almost literally, carpeting one half, and laying linoleum on the other.

Harragan, Betty Lehan (1992). "Games Mother Never Taught You," reprinted in *Organizational Reality, Reports From the Firing Line*, New York: Harper Collins.

This summary of Harragan's 1977 book also integrates well with the exercise. Harragan recommends that in the game of organizational politics, status symbols distinguish those that have power from those that do not. She argues that women cannot afford to ignore these symbols—they often need them more than salary increases to utilize their increasing authority effectively in organizations. Corner offices are choice spots, chosen by the highest ranking executives. Because women often regard the office space "game" as silly, and for the sake of privacy, they often jump at the chance to get even a small office.

*Sample discussion questions:*

Refer to the Harragan reading regarding women's power-related behaviors.

- Try to help Diane understand her current situation.
- Could she have done anything differently to prevent this series of events?

For a full version of the case, contact the first author.