

Developing Political Savvy

Politics is about the exercise of power and influence. When this happens out in the open, based on honesty and trust, it is the healthy exercise of persuasion and influence. People change their minds, or vote one way or another, based on their assessments of what is best overall for the team or organisation.

Evidence shows that the best-rated leaders have a positive impact on people way beyond their position in the hierarchy. Because they use their powers of influence with integrity, respect and concern for the overall success of the organisation they command respect. They appreciate the genuine interests of different stakeholders and can relate to concerns. They have a talent for knowing who to persuade and how to persuade them.

The unhealthy side of politics comes into play when people don't trust each other. Sometimes people say one thing to your face but leave a meeting and do something quite different. They have hidden agendas. Sometimes you or your team have "a previous" with someone you need on your side.

Dr Joel R DeLuca was a scientist in the US Military who had been repeatedly frustrated that ideas put forward by his team – worthy of merit - were rarely, if ever, implemented.

DeLuca's frustration drove him to leave the military and research the question of influencing decision-makers within organisations. It was a longitudinal study, interviewing 11,000 subjects employed by 9 organisations across multiple industries in the US and Europe.

The findings were a revelation – and they weren't complicated. Essentially there are two common mind-sets across organisations, what he calls the 'idealists' and the 'pragmatists'.

<p>The Idealists (c. 80% of employees) exert less political influence. They tend to see organisations as 'rational systems that use humans in them.'</p>	<p>Why?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They feel there shouldn't be a need. • The technical merits should be enough. • Being politically active is manipulative/ playing political games.
<p>'Pragmatists' understand that organisations aren't always rational and exert more influence. They see organisations as 'human systems attempting to act in a rational way.'</p>	<p>Why?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They know that technical merits on their own aren't enough. • Decisions are based on human agendas as well. • Being politically active need not necessarily be manipulative.

According to DeLuca, only about one quarter of the politically active are what he calls 'Politically Savvy', namely politically active players who put the organisation first, who are transparent and practice ethical influence. The more politically savvy players there are in an organisation, the better it is for the organisation, and for the individuals within it.

The research suggests those politically savvy players - as well as being ethical, well-liked, and continuously able to make an impact - have significantly higher performance ratings, two times the promotion rates, three times the bonus rates, job and life satisfaction, and are far more likely to be viewed as leaders.

A framework for thinking about Political Savvy



The Clever Fox

Foxes focus on their own agenda. They are the ones who give politics a bad name as they do things for their own ends and may not worry about hurting others in the process. They are sly though and often cover it up with charm and strong rapport building skills. They are good at organisational politics and should never be underestimated. They often get far. Unless they are in the company of a culture of Owls because Owls will not put up with sneaky, behind the scenes, two-faced behaviour.

The Inept Donkey

By contrast this animal would like to be a Fox but is not clever or skilled enough. There may well be a sense of the Donkey “putting their foot in it” annoying people instead of impressing them.

The Innocent Sheep

Sheep are often grafters who believe their performance will speak for itself and do not get involved in managing their image. Despite their reliability and integrity and probable performance skills, they do not get to hear or see the big picture because they keep their heads down. They also don’t see change coming. They get kicked by the Donkeys and eaten by the Foxes.

The Wise Owl

The Owl is both politically aware and has high integrity. Their use of knowledge when combined with their integrity creates a dynamic stance where they are capable of managing their profile, image and visibility whilst at the same time inspiring trust in others. Owls understand win-win and the value of reputation.

How to Deal with Organisational Politics

Know the rules

These are usually implicit. They frame how the game is played (and can be situational/ change). Here are some examples to help you reflect on your situation along with questions to prompt your thinking.

Follow the proper channels: Going over a manager's head to talk directly to his/her boss is not OK.

Shoot the messenger: The bearer of bad news is looked upon negatively. Learn how to tell the whole truth in a positive way.

Favouritism trumps performance: Exists where a boss surrounds themselves with 'yes men'. Favourites have enormous influence so it's worth going through them to influence.

"It feels like people are out to get you": Cover yourself by constantly communicating what's going on.

Kingpins: Every decision has to go through a specific set of people (often people who control groups or divisions). You will need to involve them.

Data driven: Data often reduces political posturing.

Decision by committee: Often you will need to engage members in person before meetings to gain buy-in. Just sending a document or email is unlikely to work.

Straight from the gut: Quick decisions in this environment often result in rapid change in direction. You'll need a solid grasp of the facts and the ability to think quickly.

Analysis paralysis: Asking for lots of analysis can be a way of avoiding/ resisting a decision. Do the analysis up front and have a really compelling story. Consider all the tough questions you might be asked and be ready to answer them.

Prepare well

Like any good sports team, preparation before the game makes the game much easier to play and gives you a better chance of winning.

- Who are the power brokers who influence/ make key decisions?
- Who has their ear?
- Who do I need to involve/ consult/ inform?
- How can I position this positively (e.g. half full/ what more we can do)?
- What data do I need to have and what level of detail to influence key decision makers?
- What is the compelling story? What's the benefit (to them/ the organisation) of doing this? What's the cost of not doing it? What are the tough questions others might ask?
- What reasons would they have to resist these proposals?
- What data and information do I need to provide to ensure everyone understands?
- How and when will I engage them?



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Set yourself up for success

These tips aren't a given – ask yourself how relevant/ useful each will be in your environment. You need to understand the political landscape you are in first. Then you can consider how to enhance your political influence – the key to success is adjusting your approach to suit the circumstances.

Build relationships

- **Understand and tap into the informal hierarchy:** Spot the 'go to' people. In a matrix your dotted line boss can sometimes be a valuable ally and help you tap into other parts of the organisation.
- **Foster alliances/ build strong relationships:** Knowing people well makes it easier to handle conflict. Form alliances in advance so that you can help each other understand the political dynamics.
- **Help others:** This earns you their trust and respect. Their gratitude will come in handy when you need help.

Master information/ data/ facts – keep informed

- **Be data driven:** Data can trump political agendas. Be ready with the facts.
- **Keep informed:** of developments in the organisation (go to people are often useful).
- **Tell the truth:** (ensure you have your facts straight).
- **Admit when you are wrong:** (this can diffuse a politically charged situation).
- **Know When to Say "I don't know":** The key to all of these is timing and place.

Communication approach

- **Take time to understand the question behind the question:** So that you anticipate political agendas and adjust accordingly.
- **Use email sparingly:** It can be easily misinterpreted. Beware of large cc lists – it can look like game playing.
- **Focus on the company's best interest:** No one can challenge your motivation when it's in the best interest of the company.
- **Stand up for yourself:** When you are right, state the facts. Don't automatically back down if someone attacks you.
- **Seek out common ground:** A critical political move is getting parties to agree on something.
- **Agree to disagree:** Your last alternative but it's a powerful tool when you are deadlocked.

6 ethical guidelines developed by the Centre for Business Ethics at Bentley College:

- Is it right? (Based on absolute principles of moral rights).
- Is it fair? (Based on principles of justice).
- Who gets hurt? (The fewer the better).
- Would you be comfortable if the details of your decision or actions were made public in the media or by email?
- What would you tell your child/sibling/ young relative to do?
- How does it smell?

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