

political savvy

Winning when only hard work and talent is not enough.

■ BY DR SUJAYA BANERJEE

Anguished words of a talented senior professional trapped in the labyrinth of Organizational Politics. Not an uncommon scenario for HR professionals who have the arduous task of coaching talented professional who are caught at the wrong end of organizational politics. In my experience there is often a moral high stand on 'being political' and 'politics' seen as dirty word.

Yet the same 'apolitical' but talented employees stand and watch helplessly as their colleagues who are adept at "reading the office tealeaves move far ahead in the game. The truth about organizations is that the most accomplished employers often take a backseat to their politically adept co-workers.

Like business, politics is NOT a spectator sport. Being political does not help those who have aspirations for advancement. For most people the word "political" carries with it connotations of manipulation, shady underhanded activities which are undesirable. But the truth about organizations is that each of them has a political landscape and politics is simply a group dynamic or characteristic. Even being non



political means taking a political stance.

In their book "Survival of the Savvy" authors Rich Brandon and Marty Seldman argue that it is possible to be politically effective without compromising integrity and that political savvy is a combination of street smarts and high principle. From many examples it is evident that what we 'don't know' can hurt us and sometimes when we believe we understand situations, we actually don't. Therefore developing an understanding of the company's system, acknowledge the culture and unwritten rules are key to survival and success within organizations. Identifying our own blind spots and increasing influence without losing our identities, with a genuine desire to act from strong ethical positions is possible through creating proactive alliances.

These alliances can allow for



better communication, advance and represent ideas to the right forums and groups to achieve organizational success.

Unbundling 'Political Savvy' as a competence reveals the competence to be described as someone who is competent at:

- Maneuvering complete political situations effectively
- Being sensitive to how people and organizations function
- Being able to anticipate landmines and plan approaches accordingly
- Have the ability to view organizational politics as a necessary part of life and work to adjust to that reality; and
- Is 'Maze-Bright'

Now where this becomes a problem is when this skill is excessively used such that it debilitates credibility and performance (possibly the origin of why 'politics' is seen as a dirty word); or when the skill is completely absent, in fact those who protest the most about this reality of organizational politics are often those who are not savvy enough to read the political landscape; let's look at how this competence unbundles when overused:

- Seen as an overly political person and not trusted
 - Would constantly be telling others what they would like to hear rather than what may be true
 - Has the tendency to overstate what he or she actually knows
 - May earn the reputation of being manipulative and scheming
- Those who are normally unsavvy and left bewildered being unable to read power structures of create alliances are:
- People who do not know how navigate through political waters
 - Is inept at dealing with 'not invented here' and territory protection
 - Rejects any attempts to understand the political landscape and is seen as politically naïve
 - May not have the ability to deal with upper management persuasively and may be too direct
 - May be unable to understand the



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TALENT MANAGEMENT

impact of own actions

Author C. Wright Mills candidly disparaged the road to advancement in organizations of that time by saying,

"Now the stress is on agility rather than only ability on 'getting along' in the context of associates, superiors and colleagues on techniques of self display and the generalized knack of handling people. But the most important single factor is personality which commands attention, charm, force of character/ demeanor.

Accomplishment without personality is unfortunate....

Personality without industry is undesirable. Getting ahead becomes a continual selling job... You have a product, and that product is YOURSELF."

Power as a means for getting ahead ought to be less important than competence, but the fact about organizational success is that it is in the worst case equally important.

What makes most people political underdogs and watch helplessly is when they take a moral high stance to refuse to participate in the incivility of politics. But politics is in fact about positioning your ideas favourably and knowing what to say how, when, and to whom.

Some good questions to ask are:

- Can you manage people's perceptions of you and your ideas?
- Are you able to convert enemies into allies?
- Can you manage the outcomes long before they are in sight?
- Do your ideas get a fair hearing?
- Do you know how to present your ideas effectively?
- Are you mostly in the loop?

Various authors and researchers have made attempts at unraveling and understanding the complete labyrinth of organizational politics. But what is important to understand is that politics by itself is not inherently good or bad in a conceptual sense.

Politics can be understood as an informal, unofficial and sometimes behind-the-scenes effort to sell ideas, influence individuals and organizations to increase power and achieve objectives.

The moot question to ask while determining whether politics is constructive or destructive are the following:

- a. Are the objectives or goals for the interest of the company or for self interest?
- b. Do the influence efforts used to achieve these objectives have integrity?

Brandon and Seldman talk about the organization savvy continuum, where they primarily define two styles which amply summarize the range of being political and where the positive influence ends, and where the destructive archetypes take over.

In Organization Political Savvy there are primarily two styles - the Power of Ideas People and the Power of Person people.

Power of Ideas people / Companies/ Teams have a different filter through which they view power, politics, ambitions and promotions. They believe power dwells in ideas, facts, logic, analysis, creativity and innovation. They believe that true power comes from work being done well and in their ideas presenting a sensible business case for the organization. They believe that substantive excellence is the pinnacle of actual power within an organization.

Power of Ideas people base their actions on 'Do my actions have integrity? Are they good for the company?'

They generally tend to place ethics and what is commonly good over their own success. Power of Ideas people generally do not cut corners to achieve their goals, and value honesty, state their goals openly, and avoid manipulating and maneuvering. Power of Ideas people believe that they will be judged basis their competence and that they will be valued when they deliver the goods.

Power of Ideas people are different from Power of Person people in the manner in which they define power.

Power of Person people are good at studying people who are powerful and aligning themselves with

whoever is in position of power. They are astute in reading the political landscape and anticipating the preferences of movers and shakers within the organization. All of this can be very valuable within an organization depending on how well this skill is used. While Power of Ideas people believe in actual performance, Power of Person people believe that many important decisions are based on perceptions. They are aware of which perceptions are valued and which ones are not desired, and are aware of how they may be viewed with respect to these traits. They strategize and make efforts to improve their reputations and change problematic representation. Power of Person people are skilled at reading the unwritten rules about what is acceptable and what is not and make pragmatic decisions so as not to be in a position of disadvantage.

These type of leaders are more careful with information, strategic agendas, waiting for the right opportunities to say the right things and share critical data.

While Power of Ideas people make their decision based on competence and merit, the Power of Person people tend to factor in relationships, loyalty, alliances into their decision making processes.

Any polarization of styles can prove to be debilitating and hence being extreme power of ideas or Power of Person people can both become a danger to individuals, teams, and organizations. Each far end of the continuum have fatal flaws.

Extreme Power of Ideas people may end up becoming very vulnerable to power of person people who are better at creating networks and alliances in a workplace.

Whenever we are less political and work with others (when the environment is) more political we tend to be disadvantaged in the following areas of political capital.

- (a) Power
- (b) Credit for Results achieved
- (c) Who gets blamed when things go wrong
- (d) On issues of promotions

(e) On issues of resources.

Especially when both the last two are in scarce supply and therefore most in demand.

The best place to be is to move along the continuum depending on the political landscape to occupy a more balanced Power of Person positioning along the continuum.

On the opposite end of the spectrum those who are extreme Power of Person people tend to risk finally compromising ethics and sooner than later fall prey to self interest.

Overtly political people start off with all the right set of intentions and principles but power, ambition, and greed can lure them to begin compromising on values. Their behaviors can result in disillusionment by their teams, loss of investor confidence, loss of company pride, market losses, etc.

Power of Person people need to move along the continuum toward the power of ideas style to integrate their people savvy with merit, excellence, and bearing the test of

organizational interest.

Leaders can play a key role in ensuring Organizational politics does not go awry and that notwithstanding individual interest, they act as guardians of organizational culture and peer experiences so as to ensure great teams that are all pulling in the same direction to achieve common goals.

In a world where the war for talent is getting more severe and good talent is scarce. It is important for Leadership to play a key role in determining how these group dynamics are handled such that the organization continues to become a magnet for good talent. Organization where extreme styles survive and thrive and where the Leaders are either part of the problem or mute spectators to these dynamics, will always be less attractive places to work and will attrite good performers.

Leaders are stewards of their Organization's political health. As stewards, leaders can gauge the symptoms of an under or over

political culture. Leaders need to be astute enough to recognize dysfunctional politics Leaders today do business in complex environments where they end up relying on the information from few people. The ability to detect deception, distinguish it from innocent information, spotting the schemers are all key for Leadership survival. Retaining the capacity to trust but knowing whom not to trust can dramatically cut down the vulnerability of a Leader.

Politically balanced Managers / Leaders must encourage people to elevate the team's status, power and influence but with a keen focus on integrity.

Leaders must be discerning on differentiating between 'a do what it takes' mindset from a self interest mindset designed to earn a favoured status. On the other hand savvy Leaders must encourage under-political teams to seek visibility and recognition for their ideas, results and potential by helping them establish a stronger team identity. HC