

# Savvy and Skillful:

## A NEW LOOK AT OFFICE POLITICS

BY ADRIAN FURNHAM



Until recently the concept of office politics was exclusively associated with dirty tricks and Machiavellian manipulation. But recently psychologists using the concept of political savvy and political skill have noted that managers can be politically aware and astute as well as behave ethically to achieve goals. The savvy manager is personally successful and held in high regard by their staff and the organisation. Moreover it is possible to define and measure political skill to determine where personal strength and limitations lie and where therefore to concentrate developmental practices. The paper ends with a description of six strategies to increase political awareness.

**P**olitics is a bad word. We have national politics and local politics, but we also have office politics. Office politics seem to be a catch-all, supermarket trolley of wickedness. “He plays politics all the time”; “Office politics caused the failure”; “She was only promoted because of office politics”.

If you unpack the concept of politics you get a long list of negative words: Manipulation, “I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine”, Looking out for #1, Destructiveness, Covert Under-The-Table Deals, Backstabbing, One-Upmanship, Deceitfulness, Turf Battles, Petty Personal Squabbles,

Back-Room Decisions, Power Plays, Behind-The-Scenes Manoeuvring, Brownnosing, Hidden Agendas, and Dirty Tricks.

What are the key features of the concept? First perhaps is the *secrecy*, the covert agendas, the under-handedness of it all. Politics conducted in smokey rooms, behind closed doors, in private clubs or in the golf course. There are the insiders and the outsiders; players and the pawns. Those in the know and those in the dark. Office politics is exclusionary. Office politics is about processes, procedures and decisions that are not meant to be scrutinised. Politics is about opaqueness not transparency.

Second, there is *impression management*. Another word for this may be hypocrisy. Office politicians (all unelected) speak with forked tongue. The clever ones understand the difference between sins of omission and commission. The others just dissimulate. What you see, hear and read is not what you get. Internal communications (except those carefully encrypted) are half-truths, little more than management

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propaganda. Office politics are about censorship; about disguise.

Third, office politics is about *self-interest*. Those involved are concerned with power and all of the trappings like money and prestige. It is about select groups high-jacking activities, processes and procedures to secure their (and only their interests). Covert groupings of individuals based on clan, ideology or simply greed, co-operate with each other to obtain an unfair share of the resources of an organisation. In this sense office politics act against long-term organisational interests at least from a shareholder perspective.

#### Why are some organisations more political?

Some organisations have always been very political. It is part of their DNA and their corporate culture. For those working there it all seems rather normal if not very nice. Yet there are other factors which seem to increase political behaviours.

First, excessive competition at the top: It is a gladiatorial fight to get ahead and foul play is the consequence. Second, companies with complex structures seem very prone to politics: the route to the top is unclear perhaps deliberately so. It takes the determined Machiavellian to push his or her way through at all costs.

Third, it occurs where there is no clear definition of performance: this may mean people deceive and obfuscate their and others' performance.

Office politics occurs in situations of high (or very low) level of change; the more things are in flux and malleable, the more the politics is likely to occur. Equally, it occurs with the refusal by powerful people to change; in this case the only strategy for the ambitious leader is devious. Limited resources and jobs at risk can increase political behaviours because of the apparent failure of more open, direct and above board methods.

Ask a group from any big organisation to rate on a 10-point scale (where 10 is high) how political their organisation is. You don't have to define the concept. You will be surprised how many people say 11 or 12 and how much they hate it.

#### Office Savvy

The negative view is clear. Politics cause distrust, conflict and lowered productivity. People do not openly share and are guarded. They spend too much time and energy ingratiating themselves to the in-group and try to work the system. The in-group are as much concerned with increasing or holding onto power



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as steering the company. The opposition is internal not external. Office politics is dysfunctional and worse, dishonest.

But there is another perspective and it's much more positive. This was the brilliant insight of John DeLuca who re-branded politics as savvy. He argued that the savvy political person was both politically aware but also acted with integrity. He noted that some people were *political avoiders* believing that simply working hard was sufficient to succeed in rational organisations. He thought as many as 80% of people might be like this. Of the remaining 20% of political *activists* but these were divided into Machiavellians (15%) who were politically aware but did not act with integrity and the Savvy (5%) who could and did act with integrity. They realised they were working in a human system and sought to understand it.

His research led him to conclude that the Savvy people are ethical, well-liked and continuously able to make an impact. Interestingly they are not different from



## OFFICE POLITICS 4 COMPONENTS



Social Astuteness



Interpersonal  
Influence



Networking ability



Apparent Sincerity

others in terms of intelligence, personality or interpersonal skills. But most importantly they have three times the network of their colleagues. They seem to constantly take small risks which paid off.

He also found from his research that the Savvy had three times the odds of a successful innovation attempt compared to Machiavellians or the non-players. They had significantly higher performance ratings. They also had twice the promotion rates and three times the bonus rates of the non-savvy. They were also three times more likely to have higher job and life satisfaction. They were more likely to be viewed as leaders.

DeLuca argued that you can teach people to become savvy and he has some really interesting quizzes and case studies that illustrate how savvy people operate. Consider the following:

When building support for a new idea, a politically savvy person would:

- Set up meetings with as many people as possible in order to build widespread support
- Set up official meetings with key decision makers to get their attention and ensure s/he is seen as working above board (i.e. not manipulating)
- Work informally with peers and formally with superiors
- Plan to discuss it informally with those who will influence the decision

You've proposed a radical new idea for the business, and your boss is intrigued by it. He says he is going to meet with his superiors within the next 2 days to make a decision on it. A politically savvy person would:

- Seize the opportunity and focus on preparing a great presentation
- Try to postpone the meeting until s/he is more sure of the data and the quality of the idea
- Try to get the meeting delayed to think about how best to proceed
- Grab the opportunity if s/he can make sure the boss will be there to support it.

He also provides some excellent case studies that help people learn how to be more savvy.

### Political Skills

Office politics (or savvy) is a skill. Clearly some people are better at it than others. But how do you define and measure it? Gerald Ferris at the Florida State University with colleagues have developed a short but valid questionnaire of Political Skill defined as: *The ability to effectively understand others at work and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organisational objectives.*

It has four but distinct components:

*Social Astuteness:* This is about being perceptive, insightful, attuned to all the vagaries and nuances of everyday interactions. It is about being psychologically minded: Picking up the clues and cues; Reading between the lines; the subtexts. Seeing the meaning in things. It concerns being aware of yourself and others: how you are "coming across"; what they are really saying.

*Interpersonal Influence:* This is about being persuasive in different contexts. It inevitably means being adaptable and flexible. The skill is about monitoring self and others sufficiently to be able to charm, cajole and persuade. And it is about knowing about and practicing those famous six influencing principles like using reciprocity norms, emphasising similarity etc. Again, this can be learnt.

*Networking ability:* This is more than having a good address book or being vivacious at dinner parties. It is understanding the usefulness of, and more importantly to be able to establish, a range of alliances, coalitions and friendship networks. This involves the serious skills of deal making, conflict management and negotiation. People are helpful (useful) for different reasons and at different times. They can be assets that need to be established and be "tapped" from time to time. They "come in handy" at different times and for different reasons.

*Apparent Sincerity:* Ah yes, that great oxymoron. It is about being able to look

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authentic and genuine on all occasions irrespective of what you really think or feel. Call it emotional labour or good acting it is the ability not to show coerciveness, manipulateness, or that one has ulterior motives. What you see is not what you get. Sincerity is showmanship: it's good acting and really understanding emotions.

It seems obvious why political skill is the king of skills at work. It builds social and political capital. Employees like to have a boss with this skill. It does them good: if, of course, he or she uses that skill to further the success of the team as a whole, not only themselves. Senior leaders like it in their staff.

### Advice: Six Strategies of Politically Savvy People

Various websites like [www.yourofficecoach.com](http://www.yourofficecoach.com) offer advice on how to be savvy.

1. Partner with your boss: make your boss a supporter because they have the power to really help you. Politically savvy people know how to “manage up”.
2. Be a team player: this is about the very fundamental skill of networking. You need allies and those who will co-operate with you. Politically savvy people develop positive relationships in all directions – with management, peers, and employees.
3. Understand the power map/network. This is about understanding where real power lies. Who knows what and what their constituencies are. Organisations have dynamic power hierarchies. Savvy people have a rich and valid map very different from the organogram.
4. Practice subtle self-promotion: This means letting people know the achievements of yourself and your team. Send out regular reports helps.
5. Connect with powerful people: Obvious but so important. You need to know who really has the power and be in their group.
6. Commit to the Business: Do not be indifferent, apathetic or negative about any aspects of the business. You need to be onside.




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### Conclusion

Office politics are about building and strengthening networks and coalitions. It is about getting together movers and shakers prepared to do the hardest thing of all – make change happen. It is also about driving through necessary but unpopular strategies as well as identifying those with energy and vision – those who command various constituencies.

Politics are about power – the power to influence, persuade and cajole. Most organisations seek out and admire a CEO who is well respected and connected. One who knows how to play-the-game; how to get people (investors, journalists, and “real” politicians) side. In this sense being political is about being shrewd, pro-active, strategic. It is being savvy which is good.

CEOs have to present a positive picture of their organisation. They have to align, steer and change the organisation. And they need help. They turn to those who have a reputation for doing so.

You can't outlaw office politics. You might want to blame everything from personal failure to falling share price on office politics. And there is no doubt that some offices are dysfunctional places to be. But better to study and try to understand management power than condemn it. And better, still, to look to acquiring the skills and outlook of the skilful savvy manager. 

### About the Author



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