



Political Competence: Survival of the Savvy

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Political savvy is a vital competence for any executive, but it's not taught in leadership or grad school courses. In fact, the term "office politics" has received a bad rap. (Words like "Machiavellian," "manipulative" and "conspiratorial" come to mind.)

Tales of political sabotage, power plays and turf wars are part of any organization's history. Nonetheless, political competence is the one skill everyone wishes to have more of—but no one talks about it.

Until recently, few books explained how to use political competence to build one's career, improve a team's results or boost the company's bottom line. Samuel B. Bacharach, director of Cornell University's Institute for Workplace Studies, recently published *Get Them on Your Side*. Rick Brandon and Marty Seldman have written *Survival of the Savvy: High-Integrity Political Tactics for Career and Company Success*.

Political competence is the "ability to understand what you can and cannot control, when to take action, who is going to resist your agenda, and whom you need on your side. It's about knowing how to map the political terrain and get others on your side, as well as lead coalitions," according to Prof. Bacharach.

Many individuals have good ideas that, if implemented, could yield positive results for their companies. Sometimes, these ideas fall flat because the leaders who propose them cannot gain support from key people.

Defining Political Savvy

It's naive to suggest that all office politics are destructive and unethical. If you define politics in such a narrow and negative way, you overlook the value of political awareness and skill.

"Organizational politics are informal, unofficial, and sometimes behind-the-scenes efforts to sell ideas, influence an organization, increase power, or achieve other targeted objectives," according to Brandon and Seldman in *Survival of the Savvy*.

There are several important reasons to acquire political savvy:

1. Ignoring its existence is akin to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. When political astuteness is combined with ethics and integrity, it can produce positive results for you, your team and your organization.
2. By avoiding or denying its existence, you underestimate how political behavior can destroy careers, a company's reputation and overall performance.
3. If you define politics in only negative terms, you are naively under-political, which leaves you vulnerable to overly political, self-serving individuals.

Three Phases of Political Competence

Political competence is a three-phase process:

1. Map Your Political Terrain

First, identify all stakeholders—anyone who has an interest in, or who would be affected by, your idea—and how they will react. Some resistance is inevitable. You must anticipate others' reactions, identify allies and resisters, analyze their goals and understand their agendas.

When you face objections, don't go to individuals' bosses or peers to undercut their arguments. Instead, ask them questions to determine their goals. A stakeholder may share your goal, but not your implementation approach; disagree with your goal, but share your approach to change; share neither; or share both. You can identify potential allies and resisters with direct questioning.

2. Get Others on Your Side

Build your coalition—a politically mobilized group committed to implementing your idea because doing so will generate valued benefits.

How do you win support? You need to be credible. You communicate credibility by letting potential allies and resisters know about your expertise, demonstrating personal integrity, and showing you have access to important people and information.

Through informal conversations, meetings and office drop-ins, you need to explain your position.

3. Make Things Happen

You must win others' buy-in by making it clear there's a payoff for supporting your effort and drawbacks for not joining your coalition. Show how implementing your idea will ease their workload, increase their visibility within the organization or help them cut costs in their unit.

Once you've persuaded people to join your coalition, you've established a base that will legitimize your idea. Coalition members will then use *their* networks to evangelize for you.

As the coalition grows, don't lose sight of the need for active leadership to keep members focused and sustain momentum. Watch for complacency and manage conflicts and disagreements over goals or processes. These are inevitable and must be resolved.

Final Thoughts on Political Competence

Research by Daniel Goleman and the Hay Group have found that political competence (they use the term "Organizational Awareness") is one of the critical capabilities that highly successful leaders utilize. Most of the "change management" literature identifies stakeholder management as critical for successful change projects so pay attention to the informal structure and the organization's unspoken rules. Spend time understanding who will be impacted by any change that you are championing. Listen to their priorities and find an inch of common ground to build upon. Read the books mentioned above. Enjoy experiencing your increased impact as you become more politically savvy.

John Cronkite works with leaders faced with the challenge of implementing change that will be sustained over time. Sustaining change requires effective leadership and top performing people. John will provide you with practical, hands on coaching and consulting to build your confidence and effectiveness at providing this leadership and bringing the best from your people. To contact John send an email to cronkite@dirigoconsulting.com and for more information about John and his work visit his website at www.dirigoconsulting.com.