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Dealing With Organizational Politics

How to be politically savvy in the corporate world

By **Aparna Sharma**

I was recently invited to an old friend's 40th birthday celebrations. Was hoping to party, instead had a stimulating discussion with Maya, a 40 plus Alpha woman (competent, confident and ambitious who always spoke her mind) on being politically savvy in the corporate world.

Maya sounded like she was a victim of organizational politics. Since, only the week before, I had attended a half-day session by Elizabeth Coffey on the topic, **"Political Savvy: Strategic Influencing in an Ethical Way"**, I too was raring to share what I had learned.

What words or phrases come to mind when one thinks of organizational politics?

- Backstabbing
- Brown nosing
- Bootlicking
- Style over substance
- Manipulative
- Hidden agendas
- Old boy networks
- Turf struggles
- Deals under the table
- Power Hungry

Maya had excelled during the last 3 years and was the main contributor to the business unit profits. Yet, a large chunk of the year-end bonus went to those who had worked for over ten years and constituted what is called the old boy's network, notwithstanding the

CEO's public commitment to gender diversity. She was disillusioned, hurt and quit because she refused to be treated like this, firm in the belief that contribution, demonstrated leadership and integrity should be the only parameters to measure performance.

The reality is that every organization has its share of organizational politics. Just like it takes all kinds of people to make this world, so also an organization. Since all are not alike, one must learn to understand and deal with the "Foxes" in the Corporate Jungle. Actually, such insights could become a source of competitive advantage vis-a-vis others.



As one climbs the corporate ladder, the ability to successfully navigate the complexities of organizational politics and influence all stakeholders including peers becomes as critical as professional competence.

What Are the Roadblocks to Being “Politically Savvy”?

As I heard Maya’s story here are my impressions. By nature, Maya was an idealist, a perfectionist, hardworking, with high moral values. She was committed to the organization’s well-being but invariably ignored the importance of interpersonal dynamics in decision-making. When I witnessed similar behavior in one of our Board Meetings, was impressed but it appeared as if the speaker was the sole custodian of the organization’s interests.



In short ‘you were with or against me’, thus discussion gets driven by the virtue of righteousness and emotion.

Maya was always so pre-occupied with work that she rarely sat back to reflect on the under-currents and glances exchanged during meetings. In a sense, she was oblivious to the organizational dynamics.

So, What Distinguishes “Savvy players”?

According to Joel De Luca (Author of the book “Political Savvy”), Savvy players have 5 traits:

- Puts the organization first,
- Keeps career as an outcome versus goal,
- Plays above board,
- Legitimizes the task, and
- Practices ethical influence

They constantly take small risks. Thus, savvy players are able to make an impact continuously, have higher chances of a successful innovation attempt with significantly higher performance ratings and are more likely to be viewed as leaders.

What Strategies Are Adopted by “Savvy Managers”?

Here is what Joel De Luca says. *One*, when building support for a new idea, set up formal and informal meetings with key decision makers and those who will influence the decision to build widespread support. *Two*, when you have proposed a radical new idea for the business and your boss says he is going to set up a meeting in a few days with his superiors to discuss it, you can seize the opportunity to prepare a super presentation (be fully prepared) or get the meeting postponed if you are not fully ready.

Three, in a meeting, to discuss radical or controversial ideas, ensure that at least 51% of the influence in the room (could be the boss alone) already understand the idea and are willing to explore it further. *Four*, whilst presenting your idea, always look at the matter comprehensively i.e. beyond technical merits and emphasize on financial and other benefits to the business. *Five*, when implementing a strategy to influence others, start with someone you trust, who has the most influence, is a good listener or any person who is a major obstacle.

The starting point to the above strategies is having a good working relationship with those who matter and peers, the ability to see things from other's perspective and think through your moves carefully.

Before starting meetings, one needs to 'Map the Territory'. According to Joel De Luca-5 key questions need to be addressed. 'Who are the key players? What is their power/influence in the organization? How much are they currently for or against the issue? Is that likely to change? Does the individual have strong positive or negative relationships with other key players?

It is very important that the answers to the above questions are mapped before a meeting. Also, try to visualize why is a person for or against the idea and list down possible his/her concerns. Next, prepare an FAQ (or maybe clear mental notes) before the meeting that has answers to every concern. This is very helpful since it also helps in clarifying your own thoughts.

If your research tells you that two people are averse to your idea, it might be useful to seek a personal meeting with one of them with an intent to influence and break the 'Jodi'. If your colleague has a personal equation with an opinion maker, request him/her to meet instead. A savvy person would see this as being practical, an idealist might see it going against his/her values.

A peep into the functional responsibility and background of each influencer would help you to identify why a person thinks in a certain way. For e.g. if the Finance Director is likely to retire in two years, he/she might be averse to a project that puts pressure on the company's cash flows in year two. I have particularly benefitted by following this approach, though it requires a lot of groundwork and thorough preparation prior to the actual meeting. But believe me, it's well worth the effort!

Your presentation should incorporate well thought through (with prior buy-in from most key players) solutions to possible objections from opinion makers. The best thing would be how to create a win-win situation.

Based on the above analysis, you have to plan your presentation and moves at the meeting.

What are the traits of a "Political Savvy" person vs. a "Machiavellian" (Mach)?

According to Joel De Luca, some of the traits are –

Political Savvy	Machiavellian
Influences	Manipulates
Creates winners	Creates losers
Team player	Lone wolf
Respect, value	Boot licking, brown nosing
Open agendas	Hidden agendas
Choosing shots	Calculating
Direct communication	Gossip, Backstabbing
Shares credit	Takes credit
Statesman	Politician

Importantly, my advice to Maya was 'at every meeting look at yourself as a professional first and then a woman. Identify and play to your strengths. Be your natural self; do not try to be what you are intrinsically not'.

According to Peter Drucker, no leadership education is complete until it is grounded in the political realities of organizational life. However, this is not something that can be taught as a course in a business school. While the theory can be, it's only when people encounter real situations in a "live" organizational setup, do they understand and over years get a hang of dealing with it by developing political acumen.

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Aparna Sharma is an Author, HR thought leader and Independent Director. She is a seasoned Global Human Resources professional with over 22 years of rich and diverse industry experience across building materials, banking & financial services, pharmaceuticals (including KPO), biotechnology & petrochemicals.



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