

The Necessary Art of Positive Politics

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16th July 2018

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Politicking-the positive way- is essential for corporate survival and success.

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A sure way of making people in organizations squirm is to ask them about workplace politics. It is the elephant in the room: everyone knows that it is present, but very few want to openly discuss it. The topic conjures up images of opaqueness in decision-making, backstabbing, sucking up, and playing people against each other.

For instance, some people may fail to secure approval for their projects despite an inordinate amount of hard work. Yet another colleague gets endorsement time and again. What is going on? Are there some unofficial rules that govern the dynamics here? How does one work the system to get ahead?

What is office politics?

The truth is that all organizations are political entities. Why do organizations exist in the first place? Because of the realization and hope that when a group of like-minded people work together they can achieve much more than a single person working alone. However, interpersonal dynamics can quickly become complicated as people

think and behave differently. Though they may sign up to a common vision, each individual will put her own spin to it. Throw into this mix diverse aspirations, motives and values. Voila! you now have conflicting perspectives, and the attendant need for people to influence others to achieve their personal, team or organizational goals. This is office politics.

Being a member of an organization is already a political act. Resources are scarce. Organization structures are flattening. Bosses and peers have their own diverse interests. Those who presume that the powers-that-be will always act rationally and dispassionately will be sadly disappointed. The politically savvy however are clear-eyed about human nature: stakeholders will protect their own needs while pursuing legitimate business objectives. By putting themselves in their shoes, they will discover what these are. Their ideas will stand a higher chance of acceptance if stakeholders recognize that their own needs have been addressed.

A study in contrast

Consider this scenario. Wen and Thomas are business heads of a European pharmaceutical company based in Hong Kong. In the recent organizational restructure, two key functions traditionally in the commercial division- customer service and presales- are centralized under the powerful regional HQ in Shanghai. This is in line with the shift towards matrix reporting. Both leaders have earlier expressed concerns that the restructuring will

adversely impact the speed with which key account managers can win critical deals and service clients.

Wen and Thomas are both highly successful and widely respected throughout the company. But people notice unmistakable differences in the way they make sense of complex challenges. While Thomas treats conflict, ambiguity and power dynamics as a technical matter, Wen takes a nuanced approach. He views things through multiple lenses and makes greater meaning out of them. Developmental psychologists call this meaning-making capability.

Wen is always calm and measured in his response. He values collaboration, and invests in building relationships within and without the company. He sizes up situations fast and definitely has a point of view. But he will listen, study the lay of the land and then adapt accordingly. He has always counselled colleagues that it is sometimes better to lose a battle in order to win the war.

Thomas is described as passionate, driven and principled. He is self-confident and very decisive. He possesses much deeper knowledge of the business than any other leaders in the company. As such, once his mind is made up on a certain course of action, he will not budge. Technical mastery is both his strength and weakness.

A year after the reorganization, Wen and his team have adapted themselves to the new realities. Wen has intensified his effort to strengthen relationship with the regional HQ. With the latter's support, he embraces customer service and presales as his business partners. As the partnership deepens, he has pre-empted the silo thinking that he had feared. They have become a high-performance team with a common purpose. His business is growing at a fast clip, far exceeding expectations.

Bosses hold their partnership as an exemplar of cross-functional collaboration at its best. In contrast, Thomas and his team are struggling. As anticipated, the wall goes up as soon as regional HQ takes charge of customer service and presales. Misalignment and differing priorities become manifest. In the midst of his troubles, he still harks back to the days when all was under him and things could turn on a dime.

Politics: Positive and Negative

Positive and negative politics are the yin-yang of organization life. Whether it is considered positive or negative will be determined by the means deployed, and goals desired. These are bright and dark ends of a spectrum along which people have to choose how they wish to play the political game.

Negative politics is about advancing oneself by any means necessary. Including hurting others, being unscrupulous, and jeopardizing overall interests. The goals are self-serving. The working climate becomes tension-charged as people feel victimized and helpless when hidden forces are manipulating who gets what, when, how.

Positive politics, on the other hand, focuses on maximizing and leveraging relationships in order to achieve organizational, team, and individual goals. The means used include legitimate ways of getting the attention of powerful people, managing stakeholders, networking, and influencing with and without authority, building alliances. It may even be necessary to engage in some "I scratch your back and you scratch my back" actions. There is nothing wrong with advancing one's career as long as it also serves the organizational interest.

People who practice positive politics are vigilant and

street smart. Through their network, they keep abreast with what is happening. When they sense that a political spear is about to be hurled in their direction, they will not be caught unawares. They will respond appropriately. When necessary, they will not flinch from exercising a sharp elbow. Such leaders are a force for good. They are custodians of a healthy and optimistic business climate in which people collaborate for a better future. In fact they aren't even deemed to be political at all.

Developing political skills

Gerald Ferris and his colleagues at the Florida State University have done much research about political savvy at work. They have shown that politically skilled leaders are masters of four practices:

Social astuteness: This refers to leaders' ability to recognize social cues within an organizational context. Such individuals demonstrate a high level of self- and contextual-awareness in social setting, sensing the emotions in the environment and what drives people within it.

Interpersonal influence: This represents the leaders' adaptability when seeking to engage and persuade others to their cause. They devote time to understand their stakeholders' needs and agenda. They then customize their message to ensure that their impact is optimized.

Networking ability: This is crucial as it gives leaders access to vital information and opportunities. Leaders with a rich and diverse network can help others succeed as they can point them to new contacts and resources.

Sincerity: In the course of interaction, how sincere the leaders come across will be a crucial factor. Leaders must be genuine, consistent, and congruous in what they

say and do.

Three additional practices may be useful to inculcate.

Decoding the hidden rules of engagement: This is where we circle back to the notion of unofficial rules in decision-making. Rules do exist but are hidden from plain sight. They are embedded in the corporate culture which guides the ways things are done in the company. Every company has its own unique culture. A high-flying executive in one company may flounder when parachuted into the C-suite of another company.

Finding out who the influencers are: Influence and power come from various sources: title, formal authority, connections, expertise, or a long history with the company. These are the people who can help you become successful, and you want them on your side. Mapping out your key stakeholders will be an indispensable first step. Such people can help you decode the corporate culture.

Building a solid reputation: This cannot be over-emphasized, as it is the foundation upon which you reach out and interact with others. How credible and respected are you? Are you optimistic, collaborative and willing to listen to others? Do people trust you? What do others see as your greatest contribution to the company's success?

Pervasiveness of office politics

There are numerous surveys done in many parts of the world that have highlighted the prevalence of office politics. In the 2016 survey by staffing firm Accountemps, 80 percent of the respondents said office politics exists in their offices. 55 percent mentioned that they take part in office politics, and 28 percent feel that politicking is very necessary to get ahead. The 2017

Roffey Park survey covering working life in Singapore, Hong Kong and China has identified politics within organizations as a key source of dissatisfaction and a major stressor.

Office politics is a permanent fixture in our working life. Political innocents will find organizations to be rather inhospitable places. By ignoring the political landscape they are handicapping themselves in their career trajectory. Despite their talents and contribution, they will not get the recognition and influence they deserve. Their

powerlessness will be felt by all. While the dark side of politics is a key factor to contend with, most organizations are not pathologically political though.

Mostly the setbacks are caused by a lack of political skills which are crucial for corporate survival and success. Challenges are almost never purely technical. By viewing them through different lenses, more useful insights can be gathered. Leaders who are politically savvy will enhance their stature and influence, lead their organizations more effectively while advancing their career.

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