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Are You Politically Savvy?

by Kevin Leavey

Bring up the topic of office politics and you can taste the change in the atmosphere. Lips curl down. Eyebrows narrow. Teeth clench. Most people I know react with passionate disdain. They all have examples of stories that start with “Can you believe...?”

- Can you believe he said that?
- Can you believe so-and-so got promoted (or still has a job)?

I don't know anyone who relishes the work required to make him or herself more proficient at office politics. At the same time, I don't know any successful executive who doesn't possess a degree of political savvy.

I have been told that politics is a “necessary evil.” I would characterize politics as a reality that must be addressed in order to succeed, which is essentially the same idea but without the judgmental tone.

Earlier in my career a colleague recommended the book *The Secret Handshake, Mastering the Politics of the Business Inner Circle* by Kathleen Kelley Reardon. Four or five years ago Dr. Reardon followed up with *It's All Politics, Winning in a World Where Hard Work and Talent Aren't Enough*. I highly recommend both books. They are both excellent “read today, use tomorrow” books. They both give great examples and vignettes of how to navigate through political situations. I will pull out some highlights to help you get started on a more politically savvy you.

The books are full of great quotes. Two that spoke the most to me are these:

“You can't know politics simply by discussing it theoretically. I learned what I know by observing, trying new approaches, falling on my face and getting up to try again.”

In a previous article I wrote about the virtues of practice, and that theme is the same here. Keep at it.

“Keep in mind that people benefit from perpetuating the image of politics as something you either know or you don't. Ignore them.”

Improving your political savvy is within your reach. Don't give up before you start, and don't give up when you stumble.

You can read either book straight through or pick through chapters to focus on your particular needs. I think *The Secret Handshake* does a great job helping you determine your current political comfort zone. Dr. Reardon categorizes people into four groups:

- Purist – believes in getting ahead through hard work.
- Team Player – believes in getting ahead by working well with others and participating primarily in politics that advance the goals of the group.
- Street Fighter – believes the best way to get ahead is through the use of rough tactics.
- Maneuverer – believes in getting ahead by playing political games in a skillful, unobtrusive manner.

Where do you fall? Once you know your comfort zone and how to stretch it, you can determine the best work environment for your particular style. Dr. Reardon provides tips on how to do just that.

In *It's All Politics*, Dr. Reardon provides a quote of particular interest to actuaries:

“If you combine technical competence with political savvy, you're less likely to be bypassed by buffoons.”

Admittedly a bit harsh, the quote holds true. While taking exams, progress is usually more dependent upon passing the tests than paying attention to the political environment.

“The magic of being politically savvy lies in advance work, not fancy strategies.”



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CONTINUED ON PAGE 4



Thinking on your feet takes practice. To advance, keep three things in mind:

1. Visibility – make your work visible to the right people
2. Centrality – put yourself in a position to be noticed
3. Relevance – be sure your work is relevant to the more pressing goals of the organization

A big part of office politics is the art of persuasion. Dr. Reardon provides what she calls her “ACE” strategies:

- A – Appropriateness, what others are doing
- C – Consistency, what a person like you would do
- E – Effectiveness, what will get you what you want

To persuade someone you must first ask yourself, “What does she/he care about the most: being

appropriate, consistent or effective?” When trying to persuade, focus your efforts on what others can do; it’s much more important than what they *should* do. Why? Because even if someone wants to help you get something done, they may just not be capable of doing so.

Your political savvy will increase just by listening to others and observing how they act. No one wants you to become a Machiavellian manipulator. Just recognize that office politics are real and something you can handle. Good luck. ●