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# Office Politics: A Little Savvy Goes A Long Way

by Mark E. Green

Political savvy is a vital competence for any professional, but it's not taught in leadership courses or at school. 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.

In fact, when you ask people how they achieve results within their organizations, they cite market analysis, strategic planning and brainstorming. They never mention politics.

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*. Art Kleiner weighs in with *Who Really Matters: The Core Group Theory of Power, Privilege, and Success*. These books shed light on this crucial competency, which every professional needs to master.

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 those who propose them cannot gain

support from key people. They are unsuccessful in building a coalition to bring an idea into practical use.

A corporate version of survival of the fittest exists, especially in tough, competitive economic times. No one wants to admit that destructive politics and gamesmanship go on, but intense pressure to succeed drives some executives to use their political savvy to win by any means.

## 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. If political astuteness is combined with the right values, it can be an advantage for you, your team and your organization.

"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*.

In this definition, there is nothing either positive or negative about politics. The term is value-free. Whether organizational politics are destructive or constructive is determined by two criteria:

1. Whether the targeted objectives reflect the company's interests or merely one's self-interest



Mark E. Green is the founder and president of Performance Dynamics Group, LLC in Green Brook, N.J. He can be reached at [mark.green@performance-dynamics.net](mailto:mark.green@performance-dynamics.net).

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2. Whether the *influence efforts* used to achieve these objectives have integrity

Political savvy and skill can help ethical, competent leaders sell their ideas and influence others to benefit the organization.

### Ignore at Your Own Risk

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.

You must develop political skills to survive and thrive in any organization. Overly political people can—and do—earn positions of power, and they can damage competent, loyal individuals who don't play their game. You need high-integrity political tactics to play a better game.

When people get burned by overly political agendas, they may quit their jobs, only to find even more political game-playing at the next company they join. Worse, if they choose to

stay in a politically charged workplace, they may allow their intimidation or resentment to drain their energy and compromise their performance. When this happens, they become disengaged.

It's far better to recognize that organizational politics exist in both constructive and destructive forms. There's simply no escaping it. That's why it's essential to learn how to use one's political savvy with integrity. Nonmanipulative tactics can help you harness the power of politics in a way that brings results. Political astuteness can be a character virtue and a company asset—if you learn to use it ethically.

### Three Phases of Political Competence

Political competence is a three-phase process. To bring people to your side, you must follow a systematic sequence. Otherwise, you may spend too much time talking with people who don't need to be convinced of your idea's merits. You may also fail to identify your chief opponents before they seize the opportunity to derail your efforts.



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## 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.

Creating coalitions is the most critical step in exercising your political competence. 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, keeping in mind four different motivational styles:

**Rational:** Use statistics and numbers to convince data-driven people how your proposal will save money, time or resources.

**Mimicking:** Cite successful companies that have benefited from similar ideas when dealing with people who are interested in best practices.

**Regulation:** For those concerned about rules and compliance, show how your idea will help in these areas.

**Expectations:** For those driven by a need to meet or exceed expectations, explain how your proposal will please customers, shareholders and the community.

## 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.

Mastering only certain parts of the three identified phases will not yield success. The following two types of people sabotage themselves by failing to complete all three of the phases when attempting to generate and implement change.

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### The Political Analyst

Don't be fooled into thinking that astute political analysts have high political competency. Analysts are skilled at anticipating others' reactions and understanding their agendas, but they can't get people to join their side. They're incapable of sustaining the dialogue and interactions necessary to build coalitions. They may try to make things happen, but mapping the terrain is only the first step—and it's never enough.

### The Consensus Builder

Consensus builders do their political mapping, understand the terrain of allies and resisters, and spend time building coalitions—but they never seem to move beyond this point. They're unable to mobilize supporters in a way that makes things happen.

Consensus builders have very strong process capabilities. The scale often tips in their favor because they can get people on board and they generally have a favorable reputation, which attracts resources and people.

They also have the ability to prolong meetings, insisting that conferences are the solution to every problem. An organization with too many consensus builders will spend an inordinate amount of time meeting, discussing, evaluating and never really accomplishing much.

Politically competent individuals map the terrain, get people on their side by building a coalition and lead the coalition to achieve results.

### Reducing Risk through Politics

There are risks with any course of action you take. You sometimes have incomplete or inadequate information when making a decision.

Building a coalition through dialogue with its members pushes valuable information to the surface.

You are open to criticism and politically vulnerable whenever you make a decision. Politically competent individuals reduce risk by getting as many people as possible on their side. Building a coalition is a search process for the best solution.

As you accumulate political currency, it becomes easier for you to wield influence and take on future projects. Your successes will expand your coalition, further enhance your influence and ultimately take your contributions to the organization to new heights.

Although you never learned about it in school, being politically savvy helps you contribute more and have a lasting positive impact on your organization. If you follow the rules and maintain integrity, it will also have a lasting impact on something closer to home—your career. □

