

SMLR Politics Article

"She got promoted because she kept taking credit for our work." "He only tells the VPs what they want to hear." We all know the "political animals" these statements refer to. According to a recent study, executives spend 20 percent of their time -- or 10 weeks a year -- dealing with company politics. So are your only options to a) be political and have statements like those made about you, or b) be non-political and stay behind? No. And how do you deal with these people? Let's talk...

My starting point is that politics isn't necessarily bad. Most of us recognize that a lot of political situations are gray, not black or white. **The key ingredients to look at are intent, context and perception.** Let's investigate each by reviewing some common definitions. Then we can come up with guidelines for practicing more positive politics. (If that's what you want to do.)

The simplest definition is "the art of the possible." Sounds trite, but contains an important principle. Effectiveness has less to do with what you do than how you do it. **Being really effective involves having a solid grasp of the context (culture) in which you're operating.** For example, to get a project funded it may be critical to know the unwritten rule that you rally informal support before putting anything in writing. **Four characteristics are needed to get things done in a particular culture:**

1. **desire** (it's something you value)
2. **authority** (others will pay attention to you)
3. **competence** (ability to follow through)
4. **awareness** (knowing the limits of acceptable risk)

Another definition is, "the striving of groups and individuals to influence the distribution of resources in a certain direction". This brings up two questions...

- What kind of striving? Are the actions being taken ones that would generally be considered ethical? Or as a friend of mine who taught ethics asks: "**How comfortable would I be having what I'm about to do on the front page of the New York Times?**" Being political can mean getting someone to see your point of view, or being diplomatic toward others.
- Which direction? **To what degree are you serving your own interests, and is this at the expense of others or a larger goal?** Just as important as your intent is how others will perceive your actions or decisions. It's natural to make assumptions about others' interests.

But how do they actually perceive what you say/do? "OK," you're thinking, "I have a better sense of what it is. So how can a good-hearted, straight-forward person like me be effective and get ahead in this dog-eat-dog world?" Here are some guidelines for positive politics:

- Actively seek to **listen to and understand** the goals, needs, hopes, interests and challenges of key influencers; let them know what yours are
- Start paying attention to "**what makes people uncomfortable** around here"
- **Use the NYT front-page "gut check"**
- Project a positive image and be seen as an optimistic person; don't criticize others
- **Adapt your style** to other's, e.g. if someone else tends to be more formal, adopt a more formal method of interacting with them
- **Do someone a favor**, who will then be more likely to help out in the future
- **Deliver on the "little things"** first to build credibility
- **Develop alliances by establishing relationships** with others in the organization; this allows you to coordinate work without going through formal channels
- Think through who'll benefit or be hurt before using information
- Before sending a memo, **ask: "who has a stake in this?"**
- Get an informal mentor to help you better learn the "how" and "context" of getting things done
- **Find out the "secrets of success" of effective people** in your organization whom you respect
- For powerful people, think through their source of power (expertise, resource allocation, position, longevity, etc.); **determine how you'll impact their power base and plan to address their needs/concerns**
- Approaching a person individually when there is a misunderstanding

In summary, organizational politics is here to stay. It doesn't have to be negative. Each of us can be effective and principled, and deal with those who are less so. We have to be honest with ourselves about what we really want, need and are willing to do. We have to actively understand what's driving others we have to deal with. And we have to be good at reading the context in which we're operating.