

Women and Political Savvy

How to Build and Embrace a Fundamental Leadership Skill

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Introduction

Organizational politics is a sometimes controversial and hotly debated topic. Many managers in large organizations lament the fact that they must even acknowledge its existence, much less engage in political behavior in order to get ahead. They question the ethics of behaving in ways that may feel inauthentic, manipulative, and ultimately self-serving. Some will ultimately embrace politics as a necessary evil, while others will refuse to play the game entirely, despite the likely negative impact on their careers.

Experiences at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) show the topic of office politics can be especially difficult for women. CCL's Women's Leadership Program contains a segment focused on organizational politics and the development of influencing skills. And through the years, we've heard women in the program struggle with the topic. They simply are uncomfortable with the idea that political skill may be an important component of leadership. Because of this perspective, they find it difficult to incorporate political behaviors into their repertoire.

A woman senior executive attending a CCL program sums it up this way:

"I despise office politics. It makes me feel like I am not being authentic. I see how the guys get a thrill out of getting one up over someone else. It's like being in a locker room where power is the ultimate game. That's not why I come to work and give it my all."

Researchers have documented gender-based differences in attitudes about office politics as well. Some have found that women perceive organizations as more political than men do. Research by Ruderman and Ohlott (2002) shows many women managers view politics as "evil" and find engaging in political behavior to be difficult and painful. Other studies have found that men tend to be more involved in political processes and regard them as a natural and normal part of organizational life.

A key reason for the varying perspectives lies in the different ways women and men are socialized. Men tend to be part of an "insiders club" where the rules of the game are made clear earlier (by other men). Women tend to be "outsiders." The rules women follow are more traditional and are part of a belief system that tells them if they work hard enough and have enough expertise, they will get ahead.

In her seminal study of women executives who have broken the glass ceiling, Lisa Mainiero (1994) found that many of the women she interviewed characterized themselves as apolitical and avoided playing politics. In reality, many of them were found to be politically skilled, despite the fact that they did not view their behaviors as political.

Mainiero goes on to say that political skill is vital for a woman's career advancement. Women need political skill to gain access to inside information and achieve the social capital needed to break the glass ceiling. But as Perrewé and Nelson (2004) point out, women also face "glass walls" that limit their movement up or even across the organization. They become stuck in less visible support roles with no direct responsibility for profit and loss and little control of people, resources, information, and technology. The result is a power deficit.

Despite significant progress, women today still are apt to find themselves in situations where opportunities for promotion, access to mentors, and encouragement to take risks is absent. These unique barriers make it more critical than ever for women to embrace and develop political savvy.

Politics: Good, Bad, or Neutral?

So who's right? Are politics a good thing, a bad thing, or a neutral fact of life in today's organizations? Your answer may depend on how you define politics in the first place.

Some view political behavior as a self-serving way to promote personal interests. Influence is used to achieve advantages and benefits at the expense of others—sometimes contrary to the interests of the broader organization or work unit (Vigoda, 2003). This definition of political behavior is supported by people who describe the politics in their organization as bullying, a way of making people feel small, exhibiting favoritism, stealing credit from someone else, or stabbing someone in the back—all for one's own self-interest. Managers who adopt this definition of politics may prefer not to “play the game,” but fear their careers will suffer if they don't.

There are other managers, though, who have learned that being politically savvy can lead to desired outcomes in a positive, authentic manner. They have developed high-quality relationships

and networks. They know themselves well, and they have a good sense about what is going on around them. They use their influence to get the resources they and their team need to function effectively. They too see politics around them. But politics to them is not a zero-sum game where they work the system to their own advantage and to the disadvantage of others. These managers regard workplace politics as neutral. They are effective because they understand others at work, using that knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance personal and organizational objectives.

Through our work at CCL, we've come to share this more neutral view of organizational politics. Politics isn't good. It isn't bad. It's simply a natural part of life in virtually any organization. Being politically savvy does not mean that you want someone else to lose in order for you to win. It isn't about being false and inauthentic. Instead, it involves the sincere use of your skills, behaviors, and qualities in order to be more effective.

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How you view and respond to politics can have a bearing on how well you do your job and how you feel about your organization and coworkers. If you accept that organizational politics is a neutral, natural part of the workplace, you can appropriately build your capacity to lead in that environment. You can be regarded as someone with effective political savvy who can influence and persuade others in a sincere, authentic manner.

In the pages that follow, we will explore the link between political skill and effective leadership and offer recommendations for how women (and men) can build political savvy in an authentic way.



The Link between Gender, Political Skill, and Effective Leadership

Because so many women executives who participate in CCL programs seem to struggle with the idea that political savvy may be an important component of leadership, the Center decided to explore the potential relationship between gender, leadership, political skill, and effectiveness at work.

The resulting *Key Lessons of Politics* research program remains one of the most definitive studies to date on leadership and political skills. Between 2004 and 2005, CCL surveyed 334 participants in its Leadership Development Programs (LDP)[®] and its Women's Leadership Programs (WLP). On average the respondents were 45 years old. Fifty-seven percent were upper-level to mid-level managers, and most worked in the private sector.

Before coming to their respective leadership development program, participants were asked to fill out questionnaires on their perception of organizational politics and their political skill on six important dimensions of leadership: **networking ability, social astuteness, interpersonal influence, ability to get visibility, thinking before you speak, and managing up.**

Additionally, managers were asked to use CCL's Benchmarks[®] 360-degree feedback instrument to rate their own performance and to request that others do so as well. Benchmarks assesses 16 leadership behaviors and five indicators of potential career derailment.

BENCHMARKS® SKILLS AND PERSPECTIVES

Strategic perspective

Understands the viewpoint of higher management and effectively analyzes complex problems.

Taking initiative

Takes charge and capitalizes on opportunities.

Being a quick study

Quickly masters new technical and business knowledge.

Decisiveness

Prefers quick and approximate actions to slow and precise ones in many management situations.

Leading employees

Attracts, motivates, and develops employees.

Confronting problem employees

Acts decisively and with fairness when dealing with problem employees.

Participative management

Involves others, listens, and builds commitment.

Change management

Uses effective strategies to facilitate organizational change initiatives and overcome resistance to change.

Building collaborative relationships

Builds productive working relationships with coworkers and external parties.

Compassion and sensitivity

Shows genuine interest in others and sensitivity to employees' needs.

Composure

Demonstrates self-control in difficult situations.

Balance between personal and work life

Balances work priorities with personal life.

Self-awareness

Has an accurate picture of strengths and weaknesses and is willing to improve.

Putting people at ease

Displays warmth and a good sense of humor.

Respect for differences

Values people of different backgrounds, cultures, or demographics.

Career management

Uses effective career-management tactics, including mentoring, professional relationships, and feedback channels.

BENCHMARKS® MEASURES THAT CAN INDICATE A STALLED CAREER

Problems with interpersonal relationships

Difficulties in developing good working relationships with others.

Difficulty building and leading a team

Difficulties in selecting, developing, and motivating a team.

Difficulty changing or adapting

Resistant to change, learning from mistakes, and developing.

Failure to meet business objectives

Difficulties in following up on promises and completing a job.

Too narrow a functional orientation

Lacks depth to manage outside of one's current function.

Key Findings

CCL's research shows that those who are politically savvy have better career prospects and career trajectories. They are seen as more promotable and are less likely to have derailed careers. Overall, it appears that a select set of leadership behaviors vary according to level of political skill. Most are centered on influence and on creating and maintaining positive relationships with others:

Building collaborative relationships. Developing and maintaining effective working relationships is related to two measures of political skill: *interpersonal influence* (a convincing personal style) and *thinking before you speak*. Those highly skilled in interpersonal influence are capable of adapting their behavior according to their audience, which appears to translate into especially strong relationships with bosses.

Composure. Are you calm in a crisis? Do you recover quickly from mistakes? *Composure* has to do with controlling impulses during difficult times and being responsible for what you say. *Composure* ratings seem closely linked to measures of how well an individual *thinks before speaking*.

Putting people at ease. This gets at the heart of what it takes to make others relaxed and comfortable in your presence. People who are warm and have a good sense of humor are often able to make others feel at ease. Bosses saw the ability to put people at ease as related to *interpersonal influence*, which is defined as a subtle and convincing personal style. The ability to adapt according to contextual conditions is related to how comfortable others are in your presence.

Career management. How well do you manage your own career? Those adept at career management develop, maintain, and use professional relationships for mentoring, coaching, and feedback. Bosses related career management to two important political skills: *networking ability* (adept at developing and using diverse networks) and *thinking before you speak* (ability to size up situations well before speaking). In other words, managers who are seen as being good at managing their careers are likely to rate highly at networking and to think about the potential impact of their words on others. Of all the skills and perspectives measured by Benchmarks, *career management* had one of the largest numbers of meaningful correlations with measures of political skill.

CCL's study found that those who rate themselves highly for their political skills are more likely to be rated highly by their bosses on these important relational skills as well. The study also showed that the *lack* of political skill can contribute to career derailment—and sometimes profoundly so. The most significant derailment predictor was a low rating on the ability to *think before you speak*, which suggests managers who think about whether, when, and how to voice their thoughts and opinions are less likely to derail.

Perhaps surprisingly, CCL's study showed there were no meaningful gender differences in the way men and women rate their own political savvy. Both rated themselves fairly high in terms of their political skills, and the positive relationship between political savvy and performance was the same for both men and women.

One reason for the lack of gender difference might be that all the participants in the study were fairly high performers, selected by their organizations to attend a leadership development program. Knowing in advance that political skill was a component of the Women's Leadership Program, it is also possible that female participants had given some additional thought to their political skills prior to attending the program and participating in the research.



Four Steps to Building Your Political Savvy

In some organizations it may be difficult to discuss workplace politics, much less to ask for help in developing political savvy. So you may be left on your own when it comes to developing the skills and behaviors you need. Fortunately there are some simple approaches you can use to help you accentuate skills, behaviors, and qualities that are vital to your effectiveness in any political environment.

1. Network.

The most effective networking is strategic – a way to build and enhance a diverse support group that can impact both your success and that of your team. By connecting with individuals who are themselves influential, you'll have a voice where you might not have been heard otherwise. More importantly, you will likely gain access to important information from key insiders.

Matters of power and influence often take place in informal settings and involve peers and others over whom you have no direct authority. You will need to learn to influence these individuals in order to lead and accomplish your organization's work.

A word of caution: As you develop your networking skills, don't get sidetracked. Remember that you need to develop and manage your direct reports. CCL's research shows careers can be derailed when leaders spend so much time "managing up" to achieve influence that they overlook conflict within their own team. Being able to manage conflict is a necessary competency for any politically savvy leader.

Tips for networking

Identify people in your organization who are particularly effective at influencing and getting things done. Notice how they behave and carry themselves and the individuals who are part of their network. Observation and modeling can help you become more effective.

Look for mentoring relationships. Mentors can introduce you to the political ways of the organization and to their own networks. There is some research that shows successful mentors don't need to be of the same gender, so don't limit your search unnecessarily. It is more important to look for someone who can tailor his or her coaching techniques to your situation and help you adjust your perspective on what it means to have political savvy. Think carefully about how the relationship will benefit both you and your mentor.

Be proactive in telling your boss what is going on. Ask for feedback and coaching that can support the changes you want to make.



2. Scan Your Environment.

Observation and information gathering can help you build your political skills and use them more effectively. Be in the moment. Pay special attention to posture and other nonverbal clues about what's going on beneath the surface. Politically savvy managers are perceptive observers who can adapt their behavior to reflect changing conditions. So pay attention and reflect on what you observe.

Tips for scanning your environment

Think about how others must be feeling in a situation, what is happening, and what circumstances are bringing you together. Pay attention to your own feelings and reactions as well.

Look for ways to validate your perceptions. Try asking others you trust about their own perceptions of a situation and compare what you hear to your own observations.

Listening and observing are important, but too much of a good thing can lead to inaction. So strike the right balance. Take in the information and then use it appropriately.



3. Think Before You Act.

Many a career has been damaged by telling an inappropriate joke, sharing information that should have been kept private, treating others cavalierly, or exploding when mistakes are made. To succeed at organizational politics, you must control your impulses and think before you act. It's the only way you can build your network and put people at ease.

Tips for thinking before you act

Take a deep breath and step back. Take the time to think through what will happen if you behave a certain way. Explore alternatives and the responses that each is likely to evoke.

Explore why you do what you do. Try taking a personality assessment. It may help you understand how your personality preferences influence your behavior in various situations and around certain people. You can identify skills and behaviors that contribute to your political savvy and see what you are doing that prevents or undermines your effectiveness.

If your unproductive behaviors are deeply ingrained, consider working with a coach. You'll benefit from someone who can help you identify your hot buttons and practice more effective ways to respond.

Don't overcorrect by avoiding all conflict or constantly trying to smooth things over. There are competing interests, goals, and emotions in every situation. Politically savvy leaders work for a win-win outcome.

4. Inspire Trust.

What kind of impression do you make on others? Do they consider you trustworthy?

Politically astute managers have learned the power that comes with inspiring trust and confidence. Rather than trying to manipulate people to achieve an outcome, they choose to behave genuinely and exhibit honesty, sincerity, and trustworthiness.

Tips for inspiring trust

Align your actions and gestures and words. Pay special attention to your nonverbal behaviors. If you fail to make eye contact or stare out the window when you are supposed to be listening, you may be sending signals that you don't intend.

Ask for feedback. A trusted friend or colleague can help you determine whether your style of interaction appears sincere, or whether you come off as manipulative.

Follow through and do what you say you will do. CCL's research shows failure to do so can derail a career. Others may see your failure to keep your commitments as a betrayal of trust.

Keep confidences and avoid gossiping, without exception.

Conclusion: Adopting an Authentic Approach to Politics

As you consider organizational politics and the approach you will take, remember what politics is—and what it isn't. Politics is not good or bad; it is a neutral and natural part of everyday life in organizations. Politics is not a zero-sum game; politically savvy individuals can use their influence in an effective, authentic manner so that all parties involved get something positive out of the experience. Politics is not about being false or inauthentic; instead, political savvy is about understanding how to use your skills, behaviors, and qualities to be effective, and sincerity is vital.

Once you accept that politics is a natural part of everyday life in the workplace, you can build your capacity to lead more effectively. You can be regarded as someone with effective political savvy, who can influence and persuade others in a sincere, authentic manner.

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In applying his research into practice, Bill's current focus is on helping leaders who are managing for the first time in their lives. Bill has more than 70 academic presentations, has been featured in more than 50 internet and newspaper outlets, and has published more than 40 peer-reviewed articles on leadership and organizational psychology including the areas of first-time management, multisource (360) research, survey development and analysis, leadership and leadership development across cultures, leader character and integrity, mentoring, managerial derailment, multilevel measurement, and in the area of organizational politics and political skill in the workplace. He also studies nonverbal behavior and its application to effective leadership and communication, particularly in political debates. Bill holds a BA degree in psychology and political science from Emory University and an MS and PhD in industrial-organizational psychology from the University of Georgia. Bill frequently posts written and video blogs about his research in leadership (usually connecting it with sports, music, and pop culture) on CCL's "Leading Effectively" blog.



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