

The Five O'Clock News®

America's Premier Career-Coaching Service: "Developing Great Careers!"

\$4.95

May 2007

A Publication of The Five O'Clock Club®—www.FiveOClockClub.com

Vol. 21, No. 5

"One organization with a long record of success in helping people find jobs is The Five O'Clock Club."

FORTUNE

Workplace Politics Reflections on Personal and Corporate Survival

by David Madison, Ph.D., Director of the National Guild of
Five O'Clock Club Career Coaches

Celebrating 25 years—
America's Premier
Career Coaching and
Outplacement Network for
Professionals, Managers
and Executives

The following article is based on a 2006 panel presentation at The HR Network, which is sponsored by the Five O'Clock Club. The HR Network is a vendor-free venue for HR professionals to meet informally and hear discussions of important issues of the day. Of course, the hints provided in this article work equally well outside the realm of human resources.

The panelists were Joel DeLuca, author of "Political Savvy" and a corporate consultant; Elise Walton, Ph.D., a Partner with Mercer Delta Consulting and consultant at the CEO level; Lisa Danels, Director, Leadership Development at Pfizer, who has been leadership director at four companies.

The Art of Getting Things Done

Most of us would probably admit a distaste for politics, especially when we think of how government operates. We have a sense that Mark Twain spoke the truth when he warned that there are two things that one should never watch being made: sausage and legislation. But what is *politics*? Webster's dictionary offers this bland definition: It is "the art or science concerned with guiding or influencing policy." Wikipedia, on the other hand, is more descriptive:



"Fredericks, you're lazy, greedy and out of touch with your fellow employees. Welcome to management."

Also in this issue

◆ Successful Job Hunters Report ◆ Age Discrimination — Or Is It?

Politics is the process by which groups make decisions. Although the term is generally applied to behavior within governments, politics is observed in all human (and many non-human) group interactions, including corporate, academic, and religious institutions. In general, politics can be considered the art of navigating through tensions among multiple "I's and the "we" to achieve collectively desired ends.

If we have a distaste for politics when we think of government, the distaste probably deepens when we consider office politics. This is very close to home—and what usually comes to mind? Gossip, favoritism, behind-the-scenes maneuvering, back-biting? These can be some features of office interactions, in some environments. But the Wikipedia definition pulls us back to a key reality: "...politics can be considered the art of navigating through tensions...to achieve collectively desired ends." In other words, *politics is how things get done.*

Politics is observed in all human (and many non-human) group interactions.

But even so, the negative stereotypes are deeply imbedded, and most of us seem to want to avoid office politics. In some studies, as many as 65 to 80 percent of employees consider themselves *political avoiders*, yielding the field to those who can be labeled the politically savvy. Political avoiders may

feel that politics is too dangerous, or unseemly: that decent, hard-working people should just do their jobs and remain above the fray. But remaining politically uninvolved—and naïve—may hinder your ability to do your job, and can be hazardous to the health of your career. It's easy to become a victim of the politics that you've resolved to stay away from! Management guru Peter Drucker cautioned that no leadership development program is complete until it is "grounded in the political realities of organizational politics." One of our panelists pointed out that "many people get Ph.D.'s in leadership without ever directly addressing the issue of politics. It is often believed that when leaders are functioning well, there won't be any politics. But we know, in fact, that politics is critical to leadership in the organization—and the higher up you go, the more critical it becomes."

Extroverts are not necessarily favored in this game.

The Possibility of Positive Politics

Of course, a distinction can be made between *positive* politics and what might be termed *Machiavellian* politics. Sometimes there *are* sharks in the water. We've probably all encountered colleagues who maneuver by means of gossip and deceit, guided only by greed or self-interest, who are out to get ahead at the expense of others. Handling that kind of politics can be the subject of



Joel DeLuca, author of "Political Savvy" and a corporate consultant. Read more at www.politicalsavvy.com.

another article at another time. Here we will consider the features and requirements of plunging into *positive* politics.

You may be wondering: Do I have what it takes? Surprisingly, however, political savvy can be studied and learned—and does not require, as one might imagine, a high tolerance for cunning or stealth.

As many as 65 to 80 percent of employees consider themselves *political avoiders*. But politics is how things get done!

Research on political behavior in corporations has shown, for example, that there is no difference in *intelligence* between the political avoiders and the politically savvy. So it's not a matter of engagement based on superior IQ: You can't look around your office and assume that your smartest colleagues are the best at office politics. Nor, surprisingly, are there personality types that gravitate more to political engagement. So having



This packed audience of HR professionals (no vendors) had a lot to think about.

everyone go through MBTI assessment would provide little clue as to who the politically savvy might be. But isn't it obvious that interpersonal skills are the key? Wouldn't it be your bosses and peers who are "good with people" who are the natural politicians—that is, those who are outgoing, personable, and who warm up to others easily? But being politically savvy is not the same thing as being sociable. Extroverts aren't necessarily favored in this game.

Any Organization is a Human System

It turns out that those who are politically savvy may simply have an ability to size up situations from a more useful perspective. That is, research has revealed that those who are savvy tend to have a *human systems view* of the organization. There may be organizational charts posted on every wall, with elaborate tangles of solid and dotted lines; there may be operations manuals and job descriptions that seem to cover everything. But the politically savvy understand that the *human factor* affects everything. As one researcher explains: "The savvy see the organization as a human system trying to act in a rational way—rather than as an economically structured entity that happens to need people to make it go. That may seem to be just a bit of semantics, but it turns out to be fundamental. When you understand people—and realize that an organization is a human system—then you know that you'll always do better if you strive to create win-win scenarios." Of course, the politically savvy know the organizational charts by heart, but they don't rely on the chains of command. They take the human factor to heart and forge *credibility paths* throughout the organization. Their success rests not so much on having expertise and communications networks, but on having *credibility networks*.

Another expert adds, "In most organizations—except for those really flush with cash—everything can be regarded as scarce. That is, budgets, people and talent are scarce. The politi-

cal avoiders always see that the glass is half empty: things are scarce, somebody has to lose resources and power. The politically savvy tend to see the glass half full, and they see power as an expandable pot and they *want* to create win-win solutions."

This is not really a put-down of the avoiders. They are commonly good, hard-working people. But they do have a cautious perspective: Their box on the organizational chart is defining and confining, and they can tell you all about it because it's *written*: "This is what it says in my job description." For the politically savvy, however, their box on the chart is their *launching pad*, from which they initiate influence throughout the organization, upward and outward. The avoiders, on the other hand, tend to have a more horizontal or downward view in the chain of command.

The politically savvy forge credibility paths throughout the organization.

The Surprising Role of Ethics

Studies of the politically savvy have also shown—and this may come as a surprise—that *they prize ethics*. For the avoiders, too, ethics are important, but the savvy have discovered that ethics are a *key to power*. Obviously you can be highly ethical and not be politically savvy, but you can't be savvy and behave unethically. With rampant corporate corruption making headlines these days, this may seem to be an extraordinary claim. But, although unethical behavior is not always caught and punished, unethical behavior usually has ugly payoffs, in terms of damaged companies, careers and reputations. Unethical peers and bosses end up being hated—and vilified on blogs! As one expert puts it, "If you are seen as an ethical player with the best interests of the organization in mind, people are drawn to you. People like working where there are no hidden agendas, where they do not have



Elise Walton, Ph.D., a partner with Mercer Delta Consulting and a consultant at the CEO level.

to watch their backs and co-workers—and where their word is their bond." Of course, there are the Machiavellians who manage to triumph, and are rewarded for their nastiness. But for most non-evil mortals, this is too unsatisfying an approach to work and to life. Ordinarily, political power and effectiveness *do* depend on ethics, or more simply put: The best way to get ahead is to be *nice* to people.

Avoiders, it turns out from the research, are well equipped to change: they have the same fundamental skills as those who are savvy—and there is a powerful incentive to make the shift in perspective. **The politically savvy are two to three times more likely to rate themselves as highly satisfied with their work. And they are two to three times more likely to receive valued rewards in terms of promotions, choice assignments, bonuses, increased budgets, and additional staff.**

Unethical behavior usually has ugly payoffs, in terms of damaged companies, careers and reputations.

HR is Well Positioned to Be Politically Savvy

If it is true that those who are politically savvy have a human systems perspective on an organization's functioning, HR should have a built-in advantage. HR officers usually play a central role in most hiring, sometimes participating for many hours in the interviewing process. Hence astute HR

DEALING WITH INTERNAL POLITICS

officers can be tuned in to personalities—and might be able to gauge how well key employees are likely to built the credibility paths that can contribute to success.



Lisa Danels, Director, Leadership Development at Pfizer, who has a been leadership director at four companies.

But this gives us only a glimpse of HR's unique perspective. HR is usually the only department in an organization that has a comprehensive overview of all employees, that is, it has at its disposal information on the talent on the payroll. One HR specialist has observed, however, that "we are sitting on a lot of data, but we have a tendency not to use it." But using it can be a key to enhancing HR's own credibility paths. An HR officer at a major US company pointed out that "one third of the executives at our company will be retiring within the next five years—what does that mean from a strategic point of view? What are the implications for leadership development? Clearly senior management is aware of what's happening, but HR can be *proactive* instead of reactive. HR has the precise data, and should be on top of creating programs for attracting and retaining top talent—as well as developing the people who are already on staff."

HR professionals who are concerned about their own careers have paid increasing attention in recent years to making a difference in the organization at the policy level. This is commonly referred to as 'gaining a place at the table,' and usually means, at the least, playing a key advisory role to the CFO and CEO. Those HR officers who are pushing in this direction may find that they face strong head winds because of the trends in the political and business landscapes. With increasing government oversight, and demands for transparency and accountability, CEOs rely more and more heavily on input from the CFO. And with IT now being a primary business driver, the CIO has become a crucial advisor.

How does HR hold its own and retain relevance? One authority on the role of HR advises: "It is incumbent on HR to be *informed*. Make it your business to know as much as you can know, comprehensively. You *want* to be part of the conversation about the government regulations and disclosure requirements that are coming down." And HR can play to its strength by bringing its understanding of talent to this conversation. Formulating effective talent management policy is a way of building credibility paths, achieving strategy and enhancing the stature of HR. ●

For more information, go to www.PoliticalSavvy.com.

Quotes to Inspire You

We live in an age when art and the things of the spirit come last. The truth still holds, however, that through dedication and devotion one achieves another kind of victory. I mean the ability to overcome one's problems and meet them head on. "Serve life and you will be sustained." That is a truth which reveals itself at every turn in the road. I speak with inner conviction because I have been through the struggle. What I am trying to emphasize is that, whatever the nature of the problem, it can only be tackled creatively. There is no book of "openings," as in chess lore, to be studied. To find an opening one has to make a breach in the wall—and the wall is almost always in one's own mind. If you have the vision and the urge to undertake great tasks, then you will discover in yourself the virtues and the capabilities required for their accomplishment. When everything fails, pray! Perhaps only when you have come to the end of your resources will the light dawn. It is only when we admit our limitations that we find there are no limitations.

Henry Miller,
Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch



Moral excellence comes about as a result of habit. We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.

Aristotle



Getting along with men isn't what's truly important. The vital knowledge is how to get along with a man, one man.

Phyllis McGinley



When I started counting my blessings, my whole life turned around.

Willie Nelson



You have to remember that about seventy percent of the horses running don't want to win. Horses are like people. Everybody doesn't have the aggressiveness or ambition to knock himself out to become a success.

Eddie Arcaro, Hall of Fame jockey

