

NAVIGATING THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE



Getting good business results is not purely about learning your trade. Below, **Siobhan Soraghan** explains how best to find your way through the hidden 'political' issues in your office, to achieve optimum outcomes.

A consultant colleague called me recently to cry on my shoulder. He had upset one of his major clients and was asked to leave the assignment early. As someone strongly influenced by the results of his most recent project, he was feeling completely deflated.

Piecing the story together it emerged that, despite the quality of his work, my friend had failed to spot the signals preceding his demise. The managing director (MD) for whom he had been conducting the project had felt threatened by its conclusions and resentful of the direct manner in which they were delivered. My friend, not realising the prevailing 'command and control' culture in which people deferred to their MD, had diminished him in front of his senior team.

Gradually realising that he had been exclusively absorbed in the technical aspects of the task, my friend began to accept that he had another duty to himself and to his business – that of developing an intelligent, proactive approach to what he would, in the past, have referred to disparagingly as 'politics'.

Meeting your own and others' needs

So what is 'politics'? Definitions include 'the use (or misuse) of power to achieve goals', and 'the study of influence and the influential'. I like to define it as the interactive process through which people seek to meet their own and others' needs.

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These needs can be professional and/or personal in nature, and they can change over time. People are not always consciously aware of their needs; and even when they are, they might not choose to articulate them.

The tool I offer below provides a method for gaining valuable insights into the unique cocktail of needs of each key figure in your political landscape, to optimise your ability to influence and collaborate. This is particularly useful today, when professionals have to integrate quickly and effectively within a series of organisations over the course of their career. Furthermore, with progressing seniority one's network of colleagues and stakeholders becomes more complex, so being adept at navigating through diverse organisational landscapes pays valuable dividends for all.

The approach I describe will help you decide with whom it is important to be connected, and how. In other words it can help you develop a high degree of political intelligence.

A rich network of threads

A useful metaphor for the political complexity in any working environment is that of a fabric composed of a rich network of threads between the various key figures. Each of these 'actors' (those active in your landscape) has a power position relative to that of others that is not necessarily obvious. In entering an organisation (eg as a new recruit or a partner/stakeholder), or embarking on a new project that spans parts of the organisation unfamiliar to you, you will need to grasp this and weave yourself into the existing fabric, choosing wisely which new threads to create such that your professional and personal objectives are best met.

Your own priorities

To begin with you need to be very clear about your own priorities, and your needs in relation to these. For each project or contract, you need to keep in mind your key objectives, the resources required to address them and the key obstacles likely to get in the way. This will make it easier for you to highlight the key players relevant to your objectives.

Win-win outcomes

However, this is far from being enough. The people whose support and input are critical to your goals may have completely different agendas from yours, even if they are working in the same organisation and towards the same goals. To maximise your influence and gain effective collaboration you need also to pay exquisite attention to their objectives and needs, and seek win-win outcomes together.

A pragmatic and powerful approach

The 'political insight mapping tool'* provides a pragmatic and powerful approach to making sense of your political landscapes (see Figure 1 on page 8). Here is an outline of how to use it.

1. Think of a key project in which you are currently involved. List the main relevant 'actors'. For each of them, consider carefully their 'power' in the project from your perspective, and make the size of the circle to represent them on your map reflect this. Then consider how easy it is for you to access them. They may be at a distant location yet your paths may cross regularly. They may be in the office next door yet rarely free to meet you. The distance you put between them and you on the map should

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By now you should be getting a sense of how attractive it is for each of these individuals to engage with you in achieving your goals. Often their attitudes and behaviours towards you will have little to do with you as a person and more to do with the wider span of what is going on in their world. If the attraction for engaging with you is low, you need to work hard to make it important and appealing enough by communicating its significance in terms of what matters to them.

5. Now do a reality check. In the relationships on your map, how well are each party's needs and expectations actually being met? In light of this, do any of the lines' colours need to be amended? An appearance of bonhomie does not mean that all are satisfied with the exchange. Likewise, a tough exchange does not necessarily mean failure to deliver what was required.

6. Now prepare to act, first identifying the critical relationships. Management guru Stephen Covey talks about the 'emotional bank balance' of each party in a relationship. He explains how trust is built when each person makes deposits into the other's account. A deposit is all the more valuable if it is chosen carefully to be of particular worth to the recipient. It is easy to make unintentional withdrawals – which, ironically, can occur through offering something that is not valued by the recipient, or behaving in a way that does not meet the expectations of the other party (easily done, if they are from another culture). So if you are finding a particular relationship challenging, consider whether there has been an unwitting withdrawal. If that is the case, it is critical that you put it right – even if it was not of your own doing, eg your predecessor having broken a confidence – or it may remain an ongoing barrier.

Another useful tack is to find common ground with the other person (eg shared goals of the organisation or project) and remind them that you ultimately want the same things. Given your understanding of their key needs, what can you offer them that they value? Also, look for latent opportunities. Has any 'credit' been building – and if so, what requests might you wish to make?

It is important that you do ask for what will help you, so long as it is realistic, appropriate to what others have to offer, and not a demand. Be prepared to negotiate.

7. Finally, after all your quality thinking, what do you conclude are the most important things that need to happen? And what are you going to do next?

Conclusion

Using the above approach you can gain vital intelligence about critical relationships in your political landscape. The resulting insights should then enable you to build more respectful, collaborative business relationships for the mutual achievement of desired outcomes. ■

FACULTY WEB LINKS

- 'The art of dealing with difficult people' – *F&M146*
www.icaew.com/index.cfm/route/149289
- 'Negotiation skills for managers' – *Webcast and resources*
www.icaew.com/index.cfm/route/143694
- 'Communication and influencing skills for finance professionals' –
Webcast and resources
www.icaew.com/index.cfm/route/129356