

## **Political Savvy: Elusive and Vital**

Daniela Truty

Organizational politics are not legitimated by institutional leaders, so skills for managing them successfully are rarely discussed. The literature suggests that political savvy is a necessary component for everyone's career success, but instruction or coaching seems to be offered to a privileged few, namely students in select MBA programs or executives, managers, and professionals in the workplace. I argue that formal skills development for political savvy ought to be offered to students and workers at all organizational levels. Instruction should be a legitimate component of higher education curricula across disciplines and particularly for students in HRD because of the applied nature of the field and practitioners' responsibilities for career development.

### **Introduction**

"He just doesn't get it!" When spoken by a powerful organizational agent about a less powerful other, these words can herald negative career repercussions or even job loss itself. Yet, *it* is not easily articulated by the accuser—*it* is just known. From my own observations, experiences, study, and reflection, I have learned that this expression in similar conversational contexts conveys exasperation about an underdeveloped pivotal competence called *political savvy*.

This summer, I developed an undergraduate course on political savvy. The many sources I reviewed in search of an appropriate text provided evidence that the expression above and political skill were somehow connected. In this paper, I draw from the burgeoning literature in the popular business press about office politics and political savvy in the workplace. After defining political savvy and describing its component skills, I discuss why political savvy awareness and behavior are important for career success. I then summarize the literature on how political savvy skills are generally learned and who ought to master them. Finally, I argue that development of skills for political savvy ought to be formally offered to workers regardless of organizational level. Because organizations tend to avoid discussion about organizational politics, instruction could begin for students in high school and definitely continue for all students in the ideological safety of higher education.

### **What Is Political Savvy and What Does It Look Like?**

*Political savvy* in the workplace, also called political intelligence (McIntyre, 2005), political astuteness (DuBrin, 1990; Reardon, 2005), political ability (McIntyre, 2005), and political acumen (Reardon, 2005), represents the totality of skills for successfully navigating the political dynamics of an organization to accomplish one's goals. Political savvy assumes the existence and inevitability of "office politics." DeLuca (1999) defines office politics as "how power and interests play out in the organization" (p. 43). Reardon (2002) adds,

Politics in organizations involves going outside the usual, formally sanctioned channels, something nearly every successful manager has done at one time or another. The real

political moves are the ones not written down anywhere. Simply put, *politics is an illegitimate means of getting things done* (p. 2).

For many, office politics holds a negative connotation, conjuring up self-serving manipulative ploys (DeLuca, 1999) and backstabbing antics (Cardillo, 2005). In fact, DeLuca (1999) has found that although many have the political skills, they choose not to deploy them for rational (good work should speak for itself) or moral (playing organizational politics is manipulative and therefore immoral) reasons. DeLuca counters that although Machiavellian types do exist in organizations, there are also those who choose an ethical, albeit sometimes difficult, approach to political savvy.

The literature suggests that it may be impossible and unwise to avoid playing politics:

To ignore office politics is to ignore those underlying forces that account for the differences in success between equally talented people. People who understand and use office politics to their advantage are much more likely to succeed than their politically naïve counterparts” (DuBrin, 1990, p. vi).

To successfully manage office politics, the savvy worker must develop and use a complex set of political skills, including but not limited to intuition (Reardon, 2005); the ability to quickly assess who holds power in a situation and who “is just faking it” (McIntyre, 2005, pp. 24-5); focus and goal orientation, relationship expertise, “an ability for bring[ing] up controversial issues without provoking or offending anyone,” and the ability to develop and appropriately use political self-defense techniques when necessary (McIntyre, 2005, pp. 24-5); impression management and an ability to “leverage power” and obtain support for one’s ideas (DuBrin, 1990); wisdom and discipline to “avoid the troublemakers, know—and follow—the chain of command, [be] friendly, but cautious, with coworkers, [not] gossip, support [one’s] boss... socialize with...coworkers” (Cardillo, 2005, para. 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9); and the ability to use the organizational “grapevine” wisely (DeLuca, 1999, pp. 45-6).

### **Why Is Development of Political Savvy Important and For Whom?**

Development of political savvy is important from workers’, organizational, and societal, perspectives. Workers need political savvy for employability, including enhanced potential for gaining and retaining employment or advancing as desired. Workplaces are affected by various socioeconomic and demographic forces, producing a shortage of resources and fueling competition. According to Klimas (2006), technical skill is no longer sufficient for career success, requiring well-honed political skill as well. DuBrin (1990) contends that people need political competence in order to defend and protect themselves from others’ devious political tactics. Additionally, they must be able to successfully identify politically dangerous situations and effectively avoid committing “political blunders...avoiding blunders in an era of downsizing is very important because managerial and professional workers are often squeezed out for minor reasons” (p. 215). DeLuca (1999) explains, “Political savvy has little to do with one’s place in the hierarchy...anyone can have political savvy regardless of position in the company” (p. 117).

DeLuca (1999) and Gilley (2006) believe that political savvy is critical to the development

of organizational leaders and managers. For DeLuca (1999), *managers* are those who manage projects, people, and things and therefore all workers who wish to impact the organization in a positive way; and leadership is needed at all levels of the organization--not only at the top.

DeLuca (1999) asserts that political savvy "is an essential leadership skill" (p. xiv). He explains that unlike leadership that is visible, leadership behind the scenes is mostly not. Political savvy is required for those who wish to understand how behind-the-scenes leadership is conducted. Reardon (2002) claims that developing political savvy is critical for acquiring the secret handshake. She explains that the "secret handshake" refers to the acknowledgement one in-group insider gives another, conveying their shared distinction as members of the business inner circle" (p. xvii). Reardon (2002) believes that political savvy is particularly important for those at higher organizational levels because positions at the top are so rare that competition for them is strong: "Political warfare at this level is subliminal and more often comprised of hidden minefields and stealth bombers than hand-to-hand combat" (p. 2). However, workers at all organizational levels must negotiate power. Those with less power engage in political behavior to get things done. DuBrin (1990) notes that power is important because some talented people have been known to exit prematurely when they were unable to acquire the necessary authority to get things done. Those in the bottom or middle layers of the organization need power to gain power; and power is often required to move into plum developmental and visible assignments.

Albrecht (2006) discusses social intelligence in the workplace and its promise for development of society's leaders. He defines social intelligence as "the capacity to get along with others and to get them to cooperate with you" (p. 222). Albrecht adds: "As the concept of social intelligence finds its way into the public consciousness, and into the public discourse about our leaders and the leadership they offer, we may increasingly hold our leaders in all sectors of society to a higher standard" (pp. 229-30).

DeLuca (1999) urges, "the basic message is: choose to become an active player in the human system, put the organization first, play above board, and most important of all, *legitimize the task*" (p. 49)

### **How Is Political Savvy Learned—Or Not—and Who Learns It?**

Development of political savvy appears to be left largely to chance. It does not yet seem to be a regular component of employee development in the workplace or in high school or university curricula. When formally taught for the workplace, it tends to be presented by external consulting groups for purposes of leadership remediation or development. In my own business experience, I have noted that other staff members, usually in managerial positions, might be offered instruction on individual political skills, but it tends not to be explicitly or effectively connected to power and politics in an organization. Inadequate instruction in political skill could place certain segments of the workforce, such as women, at a particular disadvantage in the workplace:

Ceasing to do well in their boss' eyes, they get such vague feedback as, 'you're not being a team player.' Most women fail to realize that employees are judged on interpersonal and not technical skills as they progress in their careers. And interpersonal skills often rise and fall on the nuances of male and female cultural differences (Heim & Golant, 1992, p. 6).

The literature provides evidence that political savvy is not systematically taught in the workplace because organizational politics tend to be covert. They are not legitimate conversational topics among institutional members. DuBrin (1990) explains that the subject of office politics has been “exposed” since the 1970s, many textbooks discuss ways for navigating power in the workplace, and some Ivy League business schools “including Cornell and Harvard, offer courses in power and politics” (p. 4). However, “although the art and practice of office politics have become somewhat public, it is still a topic surrounded by secrecy and denial” (DuBrin, 1990, p. vi). DeLuca (1999) suggests that those who might not see the political behavior that happens behind the scenes might be operating from the “political blind spot,” which prevents them from believing and paying attention to such invisible behaviors. They believe that behavior must be rational and ethical and that workplace decisions should be based on “technical merit” alone. Reardon (2002) points out that largely because of the competitive business environment with limited executive posts, leaders vying to acquire or hang on to such positions deliberately withhold information about how to successfully earn the secret handshake.

DeLuca (1999) stresses that before developing a strategy for accomplishing one’s goals in the workplace, one must learn about the culture and “work with the culture of the organization” (pp. 123-124). Wood (2001) cautions that different cultures can coexist in different areas of the same organization, and political skills may not be taught because office politics are not easily detected. Over time, they tend to become embedded in organizational culture and therefore taken for granted. Unfortunately, Wood (2001) complains, “there is little or no coaching by more experienced employees to guide the newer ones [in an organizational culture]” (p. 4).

Workers’ prior instruction has taught lessons of meritocracy based on rational arguments and neglected the existence of office politics. Most management texts continue to represent the workplace as a rational site, supposedly operating in the way things should be done in an organization instead of representing how things are actually done (DuBrin, 1990). In fact, some executives continue to believe that organizational decisions are based on concrete and rational facts (DuBrin, 1990). Wood (2001) points out that schooling teaches that,

rewards come with the right answer, for example, that rewards are not contingent on relationships forged with the instructor and significant people at school. You didn’t have to invest in the relationship. You didn’t have to worry about your social skills. Social skills were generally developed and displayed by hanging out with friends, our peers (p. 1).

Additionally, Wood (2001) claims, “results are ‘secondary’...It was the total opposite of everything I had learned and been conditioned to do up until this point in my life” (p. 14).

In Western business culture, reliance on individualism blurs the need for collaboration. Wood (2001) posits, “the danger in believing we can be successful on our own is that it becomes an excuse for not forging important relationships” (p. 96).

Finally, some believe that political savvy is just “common sense.” As DeLuca (1999) explains, these Savvy people are not aware of their skills, they do not question them, and see no need to teach them. “In truth, however, what is common sense for the intuitively Savvy is actually uncommon sense for the bulk of practicing managers (p. xiv). DeLuca adds that “conceptualizing behaviors and attaching labels to them is an essential part of turning unconscious competence into conscious competence” (p. 217). Still, knowing about political savvy and its concepts is not the same as being politically savvy (DeLuca, 1999).

Learning about office politics in the workplace and developing political skill, therefore, are largely by trial-and-error or self-development. Cardillo (2005) claims that most people were taught how to behave in various contexts, i.e., the library, church, school, home, in public, and so on, from young, but most were never taught how to behave in the workplace. “Therefore, many of us must fend for ourselves and learn the rules the hard way, often with dire consequences” (para. 2). The good news is that all authors of works I have consulted believe that political savvy can be developed.

To develop one’s skill in political savvy, one can turn to self-improvement sources, such as those that inform this article. DuBrin (1990), however, cautions that despite proliferation of materials about office politics, most people who read about “self-improvement” rarely adopt what they read. For those who would heed the messages in these sources, development of skills for political savvy must begin with awareness of one’s own as well as others’ political styles (DeLuca, 1999). This is followed by an assessment of who holds power in an organization so that a strategy for influencing those people could be developed (DeLuca, 1999). Those for whom these sources just do not work could perhaps “hire a personal coach” (Deep & Sussman, 1999, pp. 10-11).

### **Conclusion, and Implications**

Given the importance of political savvy for all workers, I believe that raising awareness about and teaching political skill cannot be left up to chance. Unsystematic approaches to navigating political workplaces assume and require that workers begin their journey equipped with powers of observation, reflection, communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, goal setting, self-directedness, critical thinking, learning from experience, and learning how to learn. However, educators know that student preparedness is much more complex. Merriam & Caffarella (1999) report that a major reason for adults returning to formal education is work-related. In light of forces shaping the business environment, including globalization, competition, and shrinking resources or opportunities, failure to systematically, thoroughly, and formally offer instruction in the workings of power, influence, and political skills in the workplace is tantamount to imposing a survival of the fittest approach to all who would be workers. The appropriate places for such instruction are the high schools and certainly institutions of higher education, especially those that seek to provide access to a socioeconomically, culturally, ethnically, and otherwise diverse student body. Additionally, because overt articulation of office politics continues to be taboo in the workplace, it is incumbent upon higher education institutions to provide a safe place for free and deliberate unveiling, exploration, discussion, strategizing, and critiquing of office politics.

This paper holds implications for additional scholarship and practice in political savvy. For example, none of the popular press sources cited herein interrogate structural forces and ideologies, such as patriarchy, rationality, capitalism, institutionalization, and individualism, and their roles in the creation and maintenance of the need for political skills. Most books on these shelves leave out important implications for development of political savvy for societal benefit, yet possibilities for political skill at the service of Freireian conscientization and democratic participation abound. Few works discuss political savvy in pursuit of a collective—not just individual-organizational—goal. I found no sources that question why only some MBA programs in privileged universities seem to offer formal instruction in organizational power and politics. Discussions regarding different perspectives about political savvy focus on gender.

None of the sources I cite in this paper surface perspectives rooted in cultural differences, religious preferences (although there is mention about workers' refusal to play office politics *based on moral objections alone*), ethnic origin, sexual orientation, and issues of race and class. Important work could be done to question the "inevitability" of office politics. Interesting scholarship could focus on the language and metaphors of war, the jungle, and gamesmanship used to articulate the concept of political savvy. Furthermore, research is needed to unravel implications for and interrelationships among impression management, impostorship, and authenticity with regard to political savvy. Scholars and practitioners must continue their collaboration in the study of concepts such as political savvy in the workplace. In this case, popular press sources are invaluable conduits of practical knowledge from the workplace to academia.

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Daniela Truty, Assistant Professor, Human Resource Development Program, Department of Educational Leadership and Development, Northeastern Illinois University, 5500 N. St. Louis Ave., Chicago, IL 60625, [d-truty@neiu.edu](mailto:d-truty@neiu.edu).

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