

## Secret 3

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### REAL LEADERS DON'T PLAY POLITICS (THEY TAKE IT VERY SERIOUSLY)

**M**y father, a wise, blue-collar, salt-of-the-earth man who earned every penny he ever made, said it best: “Watch out for that guy. He’s a politician.” To my father, a politician was the worst thing you could be. Straight shooters say what they mean and do what they say. They live by their word. They don’t try to trick you, turn the tables on you, make promises they have no intention of keeping, say what they know you want to hear, cut you out of the loop, use you, or do an end run around you to reach their objectives. For my father, that was the one big turn-off of working for a large organization: way too much gamesmanship, politics, and backstabbing. Who needs it?

Most of us feel the same way. And yet we all know such people in our organizations. In fact, more often than not, politicians—meaning people who are skilled at getting what they want without necessarily having the authority or power to do so—seem to thrive in bureaucracies. They rise through the ranks and, as they do so, gain allies and supporters as well as recognition, reputation, and status. They also accumulate detractors and even enemies: people who feel used, pushed

aside, outmaneuvered, and neglected. If those detractors aren't completely ousted, they always seem to be waiting in the wings, hoping for the politician to fail, ready to pounce if he or she does—and just as quick to jump back on the bandwagon when that “political bastard” favors them again. When an organization is dominated by politics, it's not pretty—an indication that trust is low, leadership is weak, and the organization is in distress.

As an executive coach, there have been many occasions when I've had to be the messenger of feedback in which a leader's colleagues, direct reports, and superiors describe him or her as being political. I know that stings. It's not a term that has any gloss or neutrality to it. It implies a disparagement of that person's character and an attack on the core of who he or she is, not just the way he or she behaves. One of my mentors, Joe Keilty, used to say that politicians kiss up and kick down: they tell the boss what the boss wants to hear; they look out for their own interests more than anyone else's; and they treat everyone around them badly. It's not easy to tell someone that he or she is a political slime ball, but occasionally this person needs to hear the news straight in order to change how he or she behaves and is perceived in the world.

As an executive coach and leadership expert, I don't see my role in life as being on a mission to eradicate politics and political behavior from the hallways, corner offices, and meeting rooms of corporate America. In fact, it is my belief, based on years of experience observing leaders and organizations, that politics is not a necessary evil in the leadership game; it is necessary. No leader achieves goals without politics. No organization is utopian because it is politics free. Instead, politics is the air leaders breathe and an important source of an organization's energy and dynamism. The fact that *politics* is such a dirty word only points to its status as

another taboo of leadership. We don't like to acknowledge the existence of politics because we prefer an idealized and sanitized view of our leaders.

And yet if we ever encountered a leader who was truly not political, we would find that person disappointingly ineffective. Politics is a necessary skill for making leadership meaningful. When I work with leaders who have been labeled as too political by their colleagues, reports, and superiors, I don't coach them to change their ways in order to become better, more morally centered, and likable people; I teach them to change their ways because it's time, at this stage in their careers, to do the political thing differently. For a leader, appearing less political is a very political act. Like any other critical skill, it needs to be mastered.

## **ALL POLITICS IS BAD**

Politics in the workplace differs from the politics we know from elections, but there are some similarities, too. Politicians who are competing in elections campaign for support for their issues and their own candidacy. They focus particularly on opinion leaders, those with sway over others, and try to garner as many votes as they can. They try to be well liked by everyone, kissing babies, and shaking hands because that sense of likeability can turn into passionate support. (FDR once said that every handshake is worth three hundred votes.) Workplace politicians do many of the same things, metaphorically. While we see electoral politics as full of staged rituals that are acceptable because they are traditional, we view any perceived lack of sincerity or any overt efforts to garner support in organizations as distasteful. Going after what you want by playing the game is somehow considered wrong.

I could cite many highly respected leadership and organizational experts for their negative views of politics. At the same time, I recognize that in the world of book reviews and jacket endorsements, this might be an impolitic thing for me to do. Oh, what the hell.

Henry Mintzberg, Bronfman Professor of Management at McGill University, is one of the smartest and most refreshingly unorthodox management and organizational experts in the world. Like Peter Drucker did, he recognizes the good and bad in our organizations. According to Mintzberg (1989, p. 236):

I am no fan of politics in organizations. But neither am I a fan of illness. Yet I know we have to understand one like the other. In fact, politics can be viewed as a form of organizational illness, working both against and for the system. On one hand, politics can undermine healthy processes, infiltrating them to destroy them. But on the other, it can also work to strengthen a system, acting like fever to alert a system to a graver danger, even evoking the system's own protective and adaptive mechanisms.

In other words, Mintzberg (like most of us) believes that politics in organizations is a bad thing, but there's a good side: when we spot the existence of politics, we know something is terribly wrong. The patient is sick, and politics is the symptom. Recognizing that, we can rush the patient to the emergency ward and save his or her life.

Mintzberg thinks of politics in terms of gamesmanship too. He has even come up with names for those games, many of which you will read with a thrill of recognition: the insurgency game, the counterinsurgency game, the sponsorship game, the alliance-building game, the empire-building game,

the budgeting game, the expertise game, the lording game, the line versus staff game, the rival camps game, the strategic candidates game, the whistle-blowing game, and the young Turks game.

From this perspective, politics indicates dissatisfaction within the ranks, conflict between power bases, and division between factions; it distracts people from important goals; and it uses up vital energy in unproductive pursuits. Mintzberg points out that some organizations are more prone to politics than others. Entrepreneurial organizations, for example, are not very political because the founder is a strong figure with a strong vision, and most people are focused on urgent objectives. The industrial (machine) organization is more prone to politics because it is more bureaucratic. Divisions have budgets that they scramble over. New generations can be in conflict with the generation in power. Line can be in conflict with management. Whistle-blowers might try to bring down the whole system. The professional organization is also prone to politics because hierarchy is flat and authority decentralized. In schools, law firms, and innovative start-ups, people assume power bases, alliances are formed, sponsorship is critical, and everyone needs to work gamely for whatever influence they can gain. In pure ideological organizations like cults, politics is not tolerated; because belief is so strong, people follow it without question.

All of this feels accurate, if viewed through a particular filter. Mintzberg does allow that politics can have a functional role. He thinks of it as a Darwinian process in which the strong survive, a conflict-heavy method by which various sides of an issue can be debated, a means by which change can be stimulated by dissatisfied people from within, and a way of easing the acceptance of executive decisions. Mintzberg

implies that in a healthy organization, only a minimum of politics is necessary, but he also suggests that the existence of politics is a sign of life. Only a dead organization is free from politics because nobody cares what happens in it anymore. If politics is a necessity, Mintzberg believes, it is because disease goes with life. That said, we need to be vigilant about watching for it and try to lead lives that are as healthy as possible.

## **POLITICS AS A MODE OF POWER AND INFLUENCE**

I disagree sharply with the view that politics is bad and should be eradicated from organizations, or at least minimized to whatever degree possible. Instead, I believe that politics is a tool that leaders must use to achieve their goals and, in the process, further the goals of their organization.

Leadership, in my definition, is an episodic process whereby an individual pursues his or her goals and vision by intentionally influencing others to perform various tasks to their full potential. Politics is an influence tactic that skillful leaders use to achieve their goals by getting others, regardless of rank, position, division, or formal affiliation, to perform on their behalf. Those others can include the CEO's executive assistant or the CEO, a direct report, a fellow vice president, or a team of consultants who are designing a new change agenda for the organization. The political leader knows how to stack the deck, play the right cards, build solid alliances, triangulate issues, and isolate those with conflicting points of view. The political leader does this in order to get what he or she wants: to achieve objectives and further his or her vision.

Mintzberg's discussion of organizational types and their propensity for politics is illuminating because it tells us how much the structure of an organization affects the way power and influence are used. Everyone knows that organizational charts don't tell the full story of how decisions are made in an organization. Title and rank do not always correspond to relative amounts of authority and influence, just as hierarchy is not a perfect map of power. This is because power comes in many different forms, all of them useful to getting things done.

According to Kathryn Stechart (1986), an expert on the differences in the way men and women use power, four distinct types of power are found in organizations: coercive, expert, referent, and perceived. Coercive power is about forcing people to do what you want. This can range from extortion and threat to simply having the authority to make others do what you want them to do because of position, status, and the ability to follow through on a perceived or implied threat. Coercive power can be highly effective in the short run, but it lasts only for as long as the threat exists and does not engender any loyalty or passion. Basically, it's impossible to influence someone to perform at his or her top potential through coercion for long.

Expert power is about the ability to demonstrate knowledge or proficiency such that others come to feel those skills are essential to the success of the organization. The person who has that knowledge or skill is given deference or authority because this power is useful and because there is a fear that he or she may withhold that power or bring it elsewhere. You can think of expert power as technical competence. Leaders tend to rise through the ranks because of their technical competence, despite our growing belief that hard skills are less important than soft skills. We value the individual's financial acumen, engineering knowledge, marketing

savvy, or project management ability, for example, and continue to promote and reward this person for as long as his or her skills are beneficial.

Referent power is the power that a leader gains over someone who sees something of himself or herself in that leader. This homophily is all about perceived similarities. We are prone to follow someone who represents us in the most basic terms. If we share religious beliefs, ethnic backgrounds, nationalities, likes and dislikes, we are more likely to share or participate in a vision, which makes us more easily influenced to perform tasks in line with that vision.

Finally, Stechert talks about perceived power as being the most effective form of all. For example, we may believe that the CEO is the most technically knowledgeable person in the organization. We may also believe that the CEO is a lot like us, and we may even believe that the CEO has the most power to hurt us and force us to comply. Altogether, that's a considerable bandwidth of power. Charisma and magnetism are some means by which perceived power gets amplified. Basically, perceived power has some basis in reality, but the sense of power can be magnified dramatically through non-rational or emotional responses in followers.

Most decisions get made informally in organizations, in between the lines on the organizational chart, and are sanctioned or ratified only in the formal meetings between those who represent established power bases. It's rare that information flow, budgetary dollars, sponsorship and support, and all of the requisite activity and decision making follow in lockstep with the organizational chart. It's much more likely that a constant scramble is going on for all of these in an ever changing world. Politics, in that sense, is the dance of the shifting dynamics of power. It's about leveraging the power you have, in whatever circumstance you currently face, to achieve your goals.



## **THE COMPETITION FOR FOLLOWERS**

If power and influence are leadership commodities, then politics is the marketplace inside the organization through which many deals and bargains are made. Everyone knows that leaders compete for resources; they grapple over slices of the budget pie, CEO face time, and staff, for example. To a degree, such resources are a way of quantifying power and influence. Leaders also compete for followers with each other, with outside distractions, and with conflicting organizational priorities.

The ebb and flow of organizational energy is difficult to harness, let alone use efficiently. Leaders can use positional or hierarchical power to control resources, make moves, and define direction. But this power does not ensure that others will follow, let alone perform up to their potential in service of the leader's vision. Leaders are constantly vigilant in their search for ways to win the competition for followers' hearts and minds. This makes them, by definition, political. We should not look at political behavior as necessarily good or bad but neutral. To evaluate the extent to which political behavior is contributing to or distracting from the organization, don't look to determine whether politics exists. Figure out what it's being used to do.

## **BUT WHAT ABOUT THE DARK SIDE?**

In my view, political behavior is perceived as a negative attribute of a leader when it does not reinforce a leader's vision or the organization's needs. When colleagues, direct reports,

and supervisors point out that a leader is political, chances are that person is not using political skill with acumen.

Some people are ultrapolitical by nature. They walk into a room at a crowded party and immediately get a sense of who is powerful and who is not. Then they brush by those who aren't important to get at those who are. Eventually the behavior gets noticed and discussed, and a reputation develops. A consensus forms that such a person is not to be trusted and must be dealt with carefully.

Other people become political by experience. They learn the art of politics because they realize that being political is essential for achieving their objectives. Perhaps they have observed others getting what they want and wondered what those others have that they do not. Maybe they are immersed in a highly political environment and must learn to swim or sink. Or maybe they realize that position and authority don't influence people as much as one would hope and learn to play the game differently in order to be more effective. In any case, being political is just one more tool that leaders have.

Some leadership experts coach executives to be less political because they have a glossy, idealized, or politically correct view of what being a leader means. In reality, most organizations can't afford their leaders to mute or restrain those political skills. Efficiency, aggressiveness, and effectiveness would be sacrificed as a result. Instead, coaches need to recognize that leadership is a contact sport in which hands get dirty and noses are sometimes bloodied. It takes skill to be viewed as a leader who is not political while being politically astute. Despite what many may wish to think, leadership is a self-serving exercise that happens to benefit the organization as a whole. Political behavior that does not serve

the leader's vision or the organization's direction is viewed negatively. Political behavior that does serve the leader's vision is called leadership.

In the movie *Power* (1986), Richard Gere plays an extremely successful political handler who has become tired of working for the highest bidder. Many of the well-financed politicians he helps get elected do not do any good once in office. To salve his conscience, he decides to select an honest candidate who stands for something and help that person get elected by using his dark arts. The candidate Gere selects is thrilled to receive his help and guidance. Gere tells the man how he must change his image and message in order to get elected, but the man refuses. He wouldn't have integrity if he did so. Gere argues that the candidate cannot accomplish any good if he does not succeed in getting elected. Put aside your integrity for the time being, he advises, and you can return to it once you are in power.

It often seems that the political leaders we elect are rarely able to live up to their potential or best intentions. Once they have sacrificed integrity to be elected, they must continue to sacrifice integrity to be reelected. Even a second-term president or a retiring senator is still beholden to the interest groups and powerful individuals who saw him or her elected in the first place. There is a fear that being political can be an effective way of gaining and maintaining power, but at significant cost. Does this mean we should avoid being political, or does it indicate that being political is a taboo—and a luxury that effective leaders can't afford?

Leaders who believe that they can stop being political once they reach the top are often deeply disappointed. In truth, being political will always be part of the game. Nevertheless, the skill set for being political changes as a leader

rises in the ranks. A leader who is an up-and-coming middle manager will probably need to gain accolades and recognition from above, while creating supportive friends and allies all around and not distancing or turning off anyone in the process. A leader at the top of the organization might need to be viewed by followers as benevolent, compassionate, articulate, and visionary. But do those attributes have to be real, or is perception more important than the reality? The question reeks of being political. To many of the world's CEOs, the answer is self-evident: part of their job is to convince people of those perceptions, regardless of the truth. I doubt, however, that they would ever admit to that in public.