

Coaching for high integrity organisational politics and networking

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“One of the penalties of refusing to participate in politics is that you end up being governed by your inferiors.” Plato

What do we mean by ‘corporate or organisational politics’?

The terms ‘politics’ and ‘political’ are often used to describe elements of the business world, often negatively. It is noticeable that in some languages (e.g. Turkish) the term ‘political’ is almost exclusively negative, whereas in English it can be used more neutrally, for example recruiting managers will say they want an executive who can be political and mean it as a strength.

The traditional definition of politics is ‘the art and science of government’, Gerard Egan in *Working the Shadow Side* (1994 p.195) says the “essence of politics is competition for a prized and scarce commodity or resource.” These suggest that politics has to do with the use of power. The word “politics” derives from the Greek word “polis” meaning state or city, “politikos” describes anything concerning the state or city affairs. Thus the root is based in any social organisation. We can usefully understand politics to mean how power is managed, how decisions are made, and how things happen or don’t happen in organisations.

When we talk about “corporate politics” we tend to mean the unwritten procedures for making things happen in an organisation.

We also talk about “office politics” which is usually conceived more negatively, for example Morehouse College in the USA has a career guide on its career services website which says - “Getting involved in office politics is a sure way to end a promising career.”

http://www.morehouse.edu/Intranet/careerservices_bus/pdf/Corporate%20Politics.pdf

From the executive coaching perspective, politics is most usefully conceived neutrally as the informal procedures for how power is managed, decisions are made and how things happen or don’t happen in organisations.

In my experience, executives usually take up one of three positions towards corporate politics. Some do not want to engage in this realm at all, believing corporate politics to be wrong, unnecessary and unpleasant. They believe that they can manage their career effectively without having to be political. Others have a similar set of beliefs about corporate politics, but have decided that reluctantly they have to engage to get things done and to achieve their own goals. A third group sees politics as part of their job and engages in this area actively and with few qualms.

What is high integrity politics?

Politics is an inevitable part of any social system and we must engage with it. If coachees can engage with it positively and optimistically, rather than reluctantly they are far more likely to be successful, and satisfied. To be able to achieve that, the concept of high integrity politics is very valuable. By high integrity politics we mean being politically active, i.e. managing resources and power in informal ways, and doing so in ways that are true to your own values and your organisation's values and interests. Working in a political way with high integrity means promoting yourself and your ideas, but does not involve undermining or attacking anyone else. (We can also use the term 'positive politics' as an alternative for 'high integrity politics'.)

High integrity political activities can be very varied, here are some common ones. An executive may consciously do favours for others (without compromising their own or their company values) realising that they may need those people's support for their own agenda in the future. A political executive will build alliances in order to win support, and may lobby key players before an important meeting, to ensure they will support a proposal. Looking for ways to engage the interests of others in line with your own interests is another political activity.

High integrity politics has always been practised and required, however we can make a case that it is even more relevant today. It is commonly stated that in modern business we are flooded with an excess of information, that decisions are made more quickly and organisational structures are changing often. This makes it much harder to keep track of people and ideas. If an executive has a good proposal, but does not actively promote it, it may never be noticed in the rush of information and activity. The same can be said for individuals. In the past companies were able to more comprehensively manage executives' careers. This is still the case at more junior levels (typically the first five to eight years of someone's career) but beyond that point, it is extremely difficult for an organisation to plan and direct individuals' career paths. If someone is not building a reputation and relationships, and getting themselves noticed, they are unlikely to be considered for promotion, given the fact that in most companies the real internal promotion process works in quite informal ways.

As well as arguing that executives need to be political to advance their own interests, we can also argue that they have a duty to do so. If their idea or proposal is going to add value to the company, then they have a duty to work informally to get that idea the hearing it deserves. Similarly if you honestly believe that you are going to be a better manager of a unit than others, you need to make sure that you show this to people, and that you are considered for the role, in the interest of all the stakeholders, considering that you will create more value for the organisation in the role than others will.

High integrity politics involves winning support for your own and others' agendas, as appropriate, and also promoting yourself and building and using organisational power, but doing it in a way that strengthens the organisation's purpose and without damaging anyone else.

High integrity politics can also be seen as including a sense of *stewardship* for the organisation (Egan, 1994, p.213), as an executive you use your power and influence for what is best for the long term interests of the organisation.

Observations from Coaching

I have worked with a number of executives who have a very similar set of beliefs and behaviours in this area. Typically they work for a world leading corporation which they have joined early on in their career, and which they have a great deal of trust in. They have been successful quickly in their

careers (sometimes with mentors who have helped manage their early career steps for them), and the organisations have taken care of their career management. These executives tend to come from expert or technical backgrounds in a broad sense, including, for example, technically expert marketing executives. In my experience this situation rarely applies to people from a sales background. By the time they receive coaching, these executives have become frustrated at the amount of politics in their organisation, but do not want to engage, and believe that “politics is bullshit” and criticise their colleagues who focus on building relationships across and beyond the company. In my limited experience these executives often also are not very aware of (or sometimes interested in) how they are perceived in the organisation, and their general relationship blindness can be a significant issue. In my opinion, these executives need to engage with organisational politics to have satisfying and successful careers, and embracing the concept of high integrity politics is a way for them to engage.

As a minor point I note that in my experience this has usually been an issue for men, and I wonder if women have been conditioned to focus more on relationships so manage more successfully in this area?

Reading in this area

Most business books or articles on politics are often hints and tips on how to survive in political environments, and often reinforce the misleading assumption that politics is by definition a bad thing. There are few books that take a broader and more helpful view and I will discuss two which I have found relevant and useful.

Egan, in his 1994 book talks about the ‘shadow side’ and the ‘hidden organisation’ and considers it as dealing with what is not found in company documents and organisational charts and what is not discussed in company decision-making settings. Egan usefully points out that this shadow side can be used for benefit, for example when executives bend company rules on budgetary or recruiting processes in order to get good things done. Whether a shadow side activity is good or bad depends upon the intention and the results. Egan draws our attention to organisational culture, personal styles and political activities which all need to be considered in this area. He gives a useful example which distinguishes high integrity politics from other forms – “If I cut deals to get my man or woman in a position simply because he or she is my person, even though someone else would be better for the institution, I am into the politics of self-interest. On the other hand, if I have a job candidate who I believe is the best person for that job, then my fighting for him or her is an instance of the politics of organisational enhancement.” (p.203)

In *Survival of the Savvy: high-integrity political tactics for career and company success* (2004), Rick Brandon and Marty Seldman make a major contribution to redefining politics in a more useful way and offering strategies for executives to follow. Specifically they talk about “The Organizational Savvy Continuum” (p.25) with one end focusing on the Power of Ideas, and the other on the Power of People. People at the extreme Power of People end can be seen as “Overly Political”, people at the far Power of Ideas end, for example the technical experts I have coached as mentioned above, are “Underly Political”. In the middle of the continuum is an area we can consider as “appropriately political” where we should try to be. This can be a very helpful concept for executives; that the place to aim for is not zero on the political scale, but somewhere in the middle area between underly and overly political. This can be seen as similar to Egan’s discussion of naive and cynical being at opposite ends of the dimension, and that we need to be somewhere between the two (Egan 1994, p. 29).

Do nice guys finish last? Research done in the field of evolutionary biology suggests that organisms with good intentions, which cooperate with others, rather than simply competing, tend to flourish. Models built using elements of game theory such as the Prisoner’s Dilemma and, critically, based on

repeated rounds of the game (matching most real life interactions) show that organisms that have a default approach of cooperating with a stranger until learning from experience not to cooperate with a particular individual, succeed in multiplying or gathering 'profit' the most successfully. For more on this see Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, Revised Edition 2006, and the Richard Dawkins documentary referenced below. Adam Grant reaches similar conclusions in his more recent research for *Give and Take* (2013).

How can we use this as coaches?

This is an area where direct discussion, and some input from the coach can be useful, to introduce the concept of high integrity politics. Sometimes this can be elicited from the coachee, but not always, and rather than ask a series of leading questions it can be better to offer the framework directly.

It is often helpful to ask executives what their beliefs are about organisational politics, and then to discuss those. This can often lead on to, or be connected to a discussion on Self Limiting Beliefs. Many coaches work with coachees on identifying, disputing and replacing their self limiting beliefs. We can ask coachees to look at what their beliefs are about politics and then examine the pros and cons of those. E.g. "promoting myself is wrong", "the company should recognize what I do". We can also look at specific beliefs that may hold them back in this area (e.g. "people aren't that interested in what I have to say", or, "if I try to start a conversation about this, I'll sound inauthentic". We can then go through the common ABCDE model (that goes back to Albert Ellis's work) of looking at the Activating experience, then the Belief that results, the Consequences, and the coachee then Disputes the belief and tries to find an Energising new belief. A similar approach is outlined in Brandon & Seldman, 2004, chapter six. It is essential that coachees can conceive of political activities positively (or at least neutrally) and that they do not see it as a 'dirty' area. As well as exploring how they feel about politics and specific areas about their own behaviour, wider discussions, such as how they feel about the exercise of power can also be useful.

Working with a coachee to analyse their use of **political capital** can also be effective. It can be helpful to think in terms of a bank account that I can make deposits to and withdrawals from. (Stephen M.R. Covey talks about a similar concept but in terms of trust, rather than political capital, in *The Speed of Trust*, 2006). The executive can think about how much political capital or power is in their account now, and how does that compare with others? They can then think about how to make more and how to spend it wisely. This is particularly important for newly promoted managers, in regards to the initial 'golden period' when executives can use more organisational power. Also in this area, discussing the concept of positional power versus personal power is useful, where we see positional power as belonging to the role, and personal power to the individual in the role. Analysing themselves and others in these terms can be enlightening for a coachee.

Working with coachees to **plan positive political activities** is also useful. For those who still resist the term 'political', talking of 'influence and impact' can be used instead. Thinking about how the coachee can build a more effective network is important, and if appropriate encouraging them to consider strengthening that network now, so it is available when they may need it in the future. Thinking about both long term and short term activities is relevant here, and this may include role-playing key conversations with the coachee. (Sometimes getting the coach to role play the coachee and the coachee to play the other person in the dialogue can produce interesting learning.)

Coaches can work with executives to help them develop persuasion and influencing skills, and to consider how to make proposals attractive to others. We can also ask them to consider the institutional resources they can use to win support for their goals. The coach can help them to

identify blind spots, or unexploited strengths they may have, and encourage and challenge them to take action.

For those who resist the concept of positive politics, taking a **different perspective** by asking the coachee executive how they manage agendas with others, and how they take decisions can be helpful. Executives often realise that they respond to those who push ideas to them proactively, and tend to give attention to those who work on building relationships with them. This can help them see that a 'political' approach is almost inevitable given our limited resources and overloaded work lives. Coachee executives need to apply this learning to themselves, and promote themselves in the same way with their bosses and stakeholders.

The world of corporate politics is closely linked with the idea of using **intuition** at work. Firstly, because of the overload of information we have and pressure to act quickly, we inevitably make decisions based on intuition, and this can be why political activities are important. For example an executive is promoted because others feel that she is the right kind of person for the role, relying on their intuition, rather than going through a formal assessment process. So the role of intuition at work means we need to be political so that we and our ideas can flourish.

Secondly, political skill is often a kind of intuition. Egan (p. 57) talks of good managers having "a third ear and a third eye. In observing and listening to the workplace, they see the below-the-surface dynamics of their companies and departments." I would argue this kind of skill can be developed. We all have this ability to sense the unwritten rules and hidden activities to some degree, but by becoming more aware of this sense we can increase it and use it more effectively. We can refer coachees to *Blink*, by Malcolm Gladwell, an excellent text on intuition ("The Power of Thinking without Thinking") which all executives can usefully develop, and one area to apply this is in the political area. By asking questions about current and past situations and focusing on political dimensions, the coach can help the coachee increase their political intuition. As they develop this over time, and with experience, they will exhibit what Egan helpfully calls the "pragmatic wisdom" that we need to be successful in today's business world (p.3).

Working with organisations or teams.

When coaching the leader of an organisation, or working with a leadership team as a team, it is beneficial to help them explore the political norms of their own organisation, and then to review how helpful these are and whether they want to change them. Egan (p.101) quotes R.H. Kilman (1985) who would ask managers to name the beliefs, values and norms that interfered with their business. He found that most managers could readily name any number of such norms, and once named they could be challenged and changed. An external coach working with a leader or leadership team is ideally placed to facilitate such a process.

Networking

People have similar unhelpful beliefs about networking as they do about organisational politics.

Effective use of networks is important for success, particularly in today's world where we have limited time to make judgements, and have to work with many different partners and stakeholders to meet our goals.

Again, coachees are often resistant to getting proactively involved in networking, there is even research that shows that people feel 'dirty' when thinking about network. As coaches we need to work at two levels – to challenge negative mindsets about networking and to help coachees think through practical actions they can take in this area if they want to.

Again, we can consider High Integrity Networking to be networking that is in line with your own values and works for the benefit of your organisation, not just yourself.

Recent research by Burt and Merluzzi suggests that **Network Oscillation** is an optimal approach. This means switching between periods of close engagement with a group, and periods where you connect with different networks. This oscillation between deep engagement ('closure') and bridge building ('brokerage') seems to lead to success.

Robert Putnam similarly recommends a balance between 'bonding capital' and 'bridging capital' in terms of networking. Putnam's work also talks about the importance of large networks and the benefits of social capital.

Tools and activities for coaches

Working with coachees to build a **network map** can be very useful. The coachee sketches a web of relationships showing stakeholders in their network – bosses, employees, peers, customers, suppliers and other third parties. The coach can suggest some dimensions to the coachee which they choose from, and which they then use to score their relationship with each person on the map. Criteria typically include - How much influence does the person have on me? How well do they know me? (and vice versa) How much do they like me? How much trust is there between us? (separately in each direction). This type of analytical framework often appeals to exactly the type of executives who need to improve their political skills. Using this analytical approach and their usually high achievement motive is a way of engaging their strengths to improve one of their development areas.

Simply asking a coachee to prepare this map often gets them to decide on courses of action they need to take in terms of being more politically effective. The coach can work with them to identify potential blind spots, to help set appropriate goals for action in this area and to hold them to account for those goals in future meetings.

(Egan, on p.220-223 of his 1994 book has an impressive range of terms for performing a stakeholder analysis. We can also let the coachee define their own criteria and terms as it increases their sense of ownership and makes it less likely that the coach will be driving the agenda.)

See the slides for examples of good coaching questions to ask the coachee about networking.

Conclusion

Organisational politics and networking are closely related areas that are relatively under-researched and not extensively discussed. These are areas that many coachees and stakeholders put on coaching agendas and as coaches we should be comfortable in dealing with them. In general our coaching work needs to act on two levels. Firstly we need to consider mindsets, and we can generally recommend a positive mindset that we should engage in politics and networking with integrity, in line with our own values and the interests of the organisation. Secondly we can use a range of practical approaches and reflective discussion to support the coachee to learn from their own experience and plan how they can engage in these areas successfully.

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